BOY SCOUTS on Open Plains

G. HARVEY RALPHSON

Doctor Dolittles
caravan
By Hugh Lofting

BOY SCOUTS ON THE OPEN PLAINS

OR

THE ROUND-UP NOT ORDERED

By

G. HARVEY RALPHSON

Author of

BOY SCOUTS IN THE CANAL ZONE
BOY SCOUTS IN THE NORTHWEST
BOY SCOUTS IN A MOTOR BOAT
BOY SCOUTS IN A SUBMARINE

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Boy Scouts on the Open Plains;

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CHAPTER I.

OVER THE EDGE.

"'Tis meself that calls this pretty tough mountain climbin', and me athinkin' all the while the road to Uncle Job's cattle ranch would take us along the bully open plain all the way!"

"Hold your horses, Jimmy; we've got to about the end of this hill climbing. After we cross this divide it's going to be the kind of travel you mention, all on the level. One more town to pass through, and then we strike out for the ranch. Any minute now we ought to glimpse the low country through this canyon that we've been following over the ridge."

"There it is right now, Ned, and let me tell you I'm glad myself that this hard work is nearly over with. Whew! did you ever see a prettier picture than this is, with the whole country spread out like a big map?"

"And that's where we aim to spend some

little time, is it, boys?" asked a third one of the four boys who, leading a loaded pack burro apiece, had been climbing a range of rocky mountains away down in a corner of Nevada not a great distance from the Arizona border.

"Yes, that's going to be our stamping ground, Jack, for some little time to come. My uncle Job Haines has his ranch away over there somewhere or other, in the hazy distance. His partner, another uncle of mine, James Henshaw, is with him in the business—you know my mother was married twice, and this last gentleman is the brother of her first husband, which is how I come to have so many uncles. What d'ye say to resting up a bit here before we start down the grade, Ned?"

The way three of them turned toward the other young fellow was evidence enough in itself to show that he must be the leader of the little company, which was in fact the truth.

All of the mountain climbers were wearing rather faded but serviceable khaki suits, which with the leggins and campaign hats proved that they must belong to some troop of Boy Scouts. But it was many days' journey from their present surroundings to the scene of their home activities, for they belonged in New York City.

Those of our young readers who have had the pleasure and privilege of possessing one or more of the previous volumes connected with this

series of stories will readily recognize the four lads as old and valued acquaintances. For the sake of the few who may not have enjoyed meeting the lively quartette before, a few sentences of introduction may be necessary before going on further. And while they are resting both themselves and their pack animals, at the same time drinking in the magnificent scenery that was spread out before them, looking toward the southeast, it would seem to be a fitting opportunity for this service.

The leader of the little party was Ned Nestor, who also served as assistant scout master of the troop, having duly qualified for the office according to the rules of the organization. He was a good hunter and tracker, and possessed a wide knowledge of woodcraft in its best sense.

Some time previous to this Ned had been given various chances to work for the Secret Service of the Government at Washington, and had conducted himself in such a manner as to win the confidence of the authorities. They realized that there were many opportunities when a bright lad might accomplish things unsuspected where a man would be apt to slip up. And judging from the success which had on most occasions followed Ned's taking up a case, it appeared as though this might have been a wise move.

One of the other boys, a short chap with red

hair and a freckled face, often acted as Ned's assistant in these dangerous adventures. His name was Jimmy McGraw, and at one time he had been a regular tough little Bowery boy in New York, until he happened to meet Ned under strange conditions, and was virtually adopted by the other's father, so that he now made his home with the Nestors. Jimmy could not entirely shake off some of the old habits; and this accounted for his making use of a little slang now and then, when trying to express himself forcibly.

The third lad was named Jack Bosworth. Jack was a splendid chum, faithful as the needle can be to the pole, and as brave as he was robust. His father being a rich corporation lawyer and capitalist, the boy had been allowed to do pretty much as he chose. Fortunately Jack was a true scout in every sense of the word, and could be depended upon to keep out of mischief. He believed Ned Nestor to be the finest patrol leader that ever wore the khaki and was ready to follow his lead, no matter where it took him.

Harry Stevens, the fourth and last of the quartette, was inclined to be a student rather than a lover of the trail and hunters' camp. His hobby seemed to lie along the study of wild animals' habits, and also the history of the ancient Indian tribes that, centuries back,

were known to have inhabited the southwestern portion of our country. He had kept harping all the while upon the subject of the strange Zunis, the Hopis, and the Moquis, all of whom he knew had descended from the original cliff-dwellers. And he hoped before going back home again to find a chance to investigate some of their quaint rock dwellings high up in the cliffs bordering the wonderful Colorado Canyon.

Harry was really on his way to the ranch of his uncles. Not being in any hurry he and his chums had first visited San Francisco, and then Los Angeles. While here they somehow conceived the rather singular idea of crossing the desert afoot, in order to have new experiences, and be able to say that they knew what it was to find themselves alone on a sandy tract that stretched as far as the eye could see in every direction.

What remarkable adventures had come their way while carrying out this scheme have already been set down in the pages of the volume just preceding this book, under the title of "Boy Scouts in Death Valley," so there would be no need of our repeating any of the exciting episodes here. They had purchased the four burros from a discouraged party of men who were prospecting for gold in the mountains to the west of the parched valley of the evil name.

Since they managed to escape from Death Valley, after almost leaving their bones there as the penalty of their rashness, some days had passed; in fact it was now a week later. They had done considerable traveling in that time, and overcome all obstacles with their accustomed ability.

All of them had grown weary of so much mountain climbing, and Jimmy really voiced the united sentiment of the party when he declared that he was yearning for a chance to see the open plain, with grass instead of the eternal blistering sand, and mottes of trees dotting the picture with pleasing bunches of green that would be a relief to their tortured eyes.

So they sat there and talked of the past, as well as tried to lift the veil that hid the immediate future, as though anxious to know what awaited them in the new life to which they were hastening.

Finally Ned Nestor arose and stretched himself, as he remarked:

"I think we'd better be on our way, fellows, if we hope to get down there to the level before night comes along. The sun's headed for the west, you notice, and as this ridge will shut him out from us early, we haven't any too much time."

"I guess you're about right there, Ned,"

commented Jack; "and for one I want to say I'd be right glad to make camp at the foot of the mountains. We can't say good-bye to these rocky backbones of the region any too soon to please me."

The four burros had rested after their arduous climb, and there was not the least difficulty about getting them started moving. In fact they seemed to already scent the grass of the plains below, so different from anything that had been encountered thus far on the trip, and were showing signs of a mad desire to reach the lowlands.

Several times Ned had to caution one of the others about undue haste.

"Hold your burro in more, Jimmy," he would say; "there are too many precipices on our trail to take chances of his slipping, and dragging you over with him. To be sure mules and donkeys are clever about keeping their footing and almost equal Rocky Mountain sheep, or the chamois of the Alps that way; but they *can* stumble, we know, and it might come at a bad time. They're wild to get down out of this; but for one I don't care to take a short cut by plunging over a three hundred foot precipice. Easy now, Teddy; behave yourself, old boy. That's an ugly hole we're passing right now, and we want to go slow."

Jimmy himself was apt to be a reckless sort

of a chap; and many a time did Ned have to check his impatience in days gone by. Jack, too, often did things without sufficient consideration, though he could hold himself in on occasion; while Harry seldom if ever had to be cautioned, for he was inclined to be slow.

They often found themselves put to it to make progress, for while they followed what seemed to be a trail over the ridge, it had been seldom used, and many obstructions often blocked the way.

Once they had to get wooden crowbars and pry a huge boulder loose that had fallen so as to completely block progress. Fortunately it had been easy to move it a few inches at a time, until they sent it into a gulf that yawned alongside the trail, to hear it crash downward for hundreds of feet, and make the face of the mountain quiver under the shock.

In this fashion they had managed to get a third of the way down from the apex of the ridge, and Ned, comparing the time with the progress made, announced it as his opinion that he believed they would be easily able to make the bottom before night came on.

"That sounds all to the good to me, Ned," declared Jimmy, with a broad grin on his freckled face.

"Hope you're a true prophet, that's all," said Harry.

"I agree with Ned," Jack broke in with, "and say, we ought to make the foot of the range before night, the way we're going, unless we hit up against some bad spot that'll hold us up worse than we've struck yet."

"That isn't likely to happen," Ned observed, "because the further down we get the easier the going ought to be."

"But I notice that the holes are just as deep," Harry told him.

"And a fall would jolt a feller as hard too, seems like," Jimmy admitted as he craned his neck to look over at a place where the trail was only a few feet wide with a blank wall on the right and an empty void on the left.

Harry nervously caught his breath, and called out:

"Better be careful there, Jimmy, how you bend over and look down. You might get dizzy and take a lurch or the frisky burro give a lug just then and upset you. We all think too much of you to want to gather up your remains down at the bottom of a precipice."

Jimmy laughed and seemed pleased at the compliment. He did not again bother about looking over, but occupied himself with managing his pack animal, which kept showing an increasing desire to hasten. At one point Ned had stopped to tighten the ropes that held the pack on his burro, and in some manner

Jimmy managed to get at the head of the little procession that wound, single file, down that steep mountain trail.

It was Ned's intention to assume the lead again at the first opportunity, when he could pass the others. Meantime he thought he could keep an observant eye on Jimmy, so as to restrain him in case he began to show any sign of rashness.

After all it was not so much Jimmy's fault that it happened, but the fact that his burro had quite lost its head in the growing desire to get down to the green pastures from which it had been debarred so very long, and for which it was undoubtedly hungering greatly.

That the unlucky animal should chance to make that stumble just at the time of passing another narrow place in the trail, where the conditions again caused them to move in single file, was one of those strange happenings which sometimes spring unannounced upon the unwary traveler.

Jimmy at one time even walked along with the end of the rope wound about his waist in a lazy fashion; but Ned had immediately told him never to think of doing such a thing again, when there was even the slightest chance of the burro slipping over the edge of the sloping platform and dragging his master along. But right then Jimmy had such a rigid clutch upon

the rope that he did not seem to know enuogh to let go when the pack animal stumbled, tried to cling desperately to the rocky edge, and then vanished from sight into the gulf.

In fact Jimmy's first idea seemed to be a desire to drag the tottering animal back to safety, and it was because he was tugging for all he was worth on the rope that he was pulled over the edge himself.

The other three scouts seemed to be petrified with horror when they saw their plucky but rash chum dragged over. None of them could jump to his assistance on account of the burros being in the way and plunging and kicking wildly, as though terrified at the fate that had overtaken their mate.

Ned was at the end of the line, and Harry, though not far from the spot where the terrible accident happened, seemed to be too terrified to know what to do, until it was all over, and poor Jimmy had vanished from their view.

CHAPTER II.

LUCKY JIMMY.

"Oh! Ned, he's gone—poor Jimmy—pulled right over by that burro!" Harry was crying as he stood there almost petrified with horror, while his own pack animal acted as though it might be terrified by the fate that had overtaken its mate, for it snorted and pulled back strenuously.

Ned knew that unless the remaining three burros were quieted a still greater disaster was apt to overtake them.

"Speak to your animal, Harry; get him soothed right away! Easy now, Teddy, stand still where you are! It's all right, old fellow! Back up against the rock and stand still there."

Ned as he spoke in this strain managed to throw a coil or two of the leading rope over a jutting spur of rock. Then turning round, he crept on hands and knees to the edge of the yawning precipice and looked over, shuddering to note that while not nearly so high as that other precipice had been, at the same time the fall must be all of seventy feet.

There at the foot he could see the unfortunate

burro on his back and with never a sign of life about him. Doubtless that tumble must have effectually broken his neck and ended his days of usefulness.

"Do you see him, Ned?" asked a trembling voice close by, and the scout leader knew that Jack too had crawled to the edge in order to discover what had become of poor Jimmy McGraw.

"Not yet," replied Ned, sadly; "he may be hidden under the burro, or lying in among that clump of bushes."

"But glory be, he ain't, all the same!" said a voice just then that thrilled them all. "If ye be lookin' over this way ye'll discover the same Jimmy aholdin' on with a death grip to a fine old rock that sticks out from the face of the precipice. But 'tis me arms that feel like they was pulled part way out of the sockets with the jerk; and I'd thank ye to pass a rope down as soon as ye get over the surprise of havin' a ghost address ye."

"Bully for you, Jimmy!" exclaimed Jack; "seems like you've got nearly as many lives as a cat. Hold on like anything, because Ned's getting a rope right now, and he'll heave it over in three shakes of a lamb's tail. Don't look down, Jimmy, but keep your eye on me. We'll pull you out of that in a jiffy, sure we will. And here comes Ned right now with the rope. He's

even made a noose at the end, so as to let you put your foot in the same. Keep holding on, Jimmy, old fellow!"

In this manner, then, did Jack try to encourage the one in peril, so as to stiffen his muscles, and cause him to keep his grip on that friendly crag that had saved him from sharing the dreadful fate of the wretched burro.

Jimmy had fortunately kept his wits about him, and although the strain was very great, because he could find no rest for his dangling feet, he managed to hold his awkward position until the rope came within reach.

"Be careful, now, how you manage!" called Ned, from his position fifteen feet above the head of the imperiled scout. "Let me angle for your foot, and once I get the noose fast around it, you can rest your weight safely. But Jimmy, remember not to let go with one hand, because your other might slip. Leave it all to me."

Ned was already working the rope so that the open noose twirled slowly around, coming in contact with Jimmy's foot, which the other thrust out purposely. While no expert in such angling and more or less worked up with fears lest Jimmy suddenly lose his precarious hold, and go down to his death, Ned presently met with success. The noose passed over the waiting foot, and was instantly jerked tight by a quick movement from above.

By then Jack was alongside the scout master eager to lend his assistance when it came to the point of lifting Jimmy. Harry, too, hovered just behind them, unable to look over because it made him dizzy when so terribly excited, but only too ready to take hold of the end of the rope and bracing his feet against some projection of the rocky trail, throw all his weight into the endeavor to draw the one they meant to rescue to the safety of the path.

It was speedily but cautiously accomplished, for Ned would not allow himself to be needlessly hurried, knowing how disasters so often result from not taking the proper care.

Jimmy was looking a trifle peaked and worried as he came clambering over the edge of the narrow path, assisted by Ned, who as soon as he could get a grip on the other scout's jacket knew that all was well. No sooner did Jimmy realize that he was surely safe than he proceeded to indulge on one of his favorite grins, although they could see that a deep sigh of gratitude accompanied the same.

The very first thing he did was to turn around, and lying flat on his chest, look back down into that gulf from which he had just been dragged.

"Gee, whiz! but that was somethin' of a drop, believe me!" he remarked, trying to keep his voice from trembling. "And there lies me silly

old burro on his back with never a sign of a kick acomin'. He's sure on the blink and whatever am I agoin' to do now, without any Navajo blanket to sleep in nights? Mebbe we might have ropes aplenty to lower me down there, so I could recover me valuables. 'Tis a piece of great luck I had me Marlin gun in me hands at the time and dropped it on the ledge, so I did."

"If we couldn't get the things any other way, Jimmy," announced Ned, "perhaps I'd agree to that spliced rope business, because we've got more than thirty yards of good line with us, but I'd go down myself and not let you try a second time. Still I don't think it'll be necessary. From what I see of the lay of the mountain we can reach that place after we leave this narrow trail."

Jimmy did not insist. Perhaps his nerves had been more roughly shaken by his recent experience than he cared to admit; and the possibility of again finding himself dangling in space did not appeal very strongly to him.

It was just as well that Ned decided the matter as he did, for they found that once the end of the narrow stretch of rock was gained it was no great task to creep along the side of the mountain to the place where the dead pack animal lay.

Ned and Jack made the little journey and in due time turned up again carrying with them

all that had been upon the burro, save the water keg.

"We left that behind," explained Ned, "because as we are done with desert travel for this trip we won't find any need of such a thing. But here's your precious Navajo colored blanket, Jimmy; likewise we've saved what grub there was in the pack."

"Good for you, Ned; I'd hated to lose that blanket the worst kind, you know; and as for the food end of the deal, well, what's the use telling you how I feel about that when you all know that I'm the candy boy when the dinner horn blows."

Jimmy was a great "feeder," as Jack called it, and on many an occasion this weakness on his part had made him the butt of practical jokes on the part of his chums. But Jimmy was not the one to give up any cherished object simply because some one laughed at him on account of it. He was more apt to join in the merriment and consider it all a good joke.

The journey was now resumed, and the balance of the afternoon they met with no new hardships or perils worth recording. When the day was done and the shadows of coming night began to steal forth from all their hiding-places where the bright sunlight had failed to locate them, the four scouts had reached the foot of the rocky mountain range and looked out upon the plain.

Here they made camp and passed a pleasant night with nothing to disturb their slumbers save the distant howl of a wolf, which was a familiar sound in the ears of these lads, since they had roughed it on many occasions in the past in more than a few strange parts of the world.

Although they had recently passed through some very arduous experiences these were only looked on as vague reminiscences by these energetic chums. The future beckoned with rosy fingers and that level plain looked very attractive in their eyes, after such a long and painful trip across the burning deserts and through that terrible Death Valley, where so many venturesome prospectors, gold-mad, have left their bones as a monument to their folly.

When morning came again they cooked breakfast with new vim. And the fragrant odor of the coffee seemed to appeal to them with more than ordinary force because of the bright prospect that opened before them.

"Ned says it might be only two more days before we get close to Uncle Job's ranch," remarked Harry, as he assisted Jimmy in getting breakfast; for since the latter was so fond of eating his comrades always saw to it that he had a hand in the preparation of the meals, to which Jimmy was never heard to offer the slightest objection.

"Then it's me that will have to be studying harder on all them cowboy terms so they won't take me for a greeny," Jimmy went on to say in reply. "You just wait and see how I branch out a full-blown puncher. Right now I c'n ride a bucking pony and stick in the saddle like a leech; and I'm practicin' how to throw a rope, though I must say I don't get it very good and sometimes drop the old loop over my own coco instead of the post I'm aimin' to lasso. But I'll never give it up till I get there. That's the way with the McGraws, we 're all set in our way and want baseball championships and everything else that's good to own."

"Jimmy," called out Jack just then, "I think if you didn't talk so much we'd be getting our breakfast sooner, because you kind of cool things off. There, see how the coffee boils like mad whenever you hold up. How about it, Harry, isn't it nearly done? I'm feeling half-starved, to tell you the truth."

"Then I'm not the only pebble on the beach this time, it seems," chuckled Jimmy, who was so used to being made fun of on account of his voracious appetitie that he felt happy to find that someone else could also get hungry on occasion.

"In three minutes we'll give you the high sign, Jack," Harry announced and he was as good as his word, for it was not long before the chums

might have been seen discussing the food that had been prepared and making merry over the meal as was their usual custom.

Starting forth in high spirits they began to head across the plain and at about noon all of them were electrified on hearing the distant but unmistakable whistle of a locomotive, showing that they were approaching the railroad.

After their recent experiences in the dead lands this sign of civilization was enough to thrill them through and through. Jimmy was immediately waving his hat and letting off a few yells to denote his overwhelming joy; while even Ned looked around with more or less of a smile on his face.

"Sounds like home, don't it?" asked Jack, beaming on the rest. "Takes you back to good old New York, where you can sit down next to a plate of ice cream when your tongue feels thick from the heat and cool off. Seems like I'd never get my fill of cold stuff again."

Pushing on they presently sighted the railroad and aslo discovered that just as Ned had figured would be the case, they were approaching a town.

"That's where we ordered our mail to be sent on from Los Angeles, up to the tenth, and I hope we find letters waiting for us," Harry remarked; for he was quite a correspondent,

though not in the same class with Frank Shaw, another member of the Black Bear Patrol, whose father owned a big daily in New York and who often contributed letters to its columns when he was away on trips with Ned.

Ned on his part was wondering whether he would receive anything in the way of business communications from the Government people in Washington, for it would be forwarded on from Los Angeles if such a message did come in cipher.

So anxious were the boys to reach the settlement on the railroad that it was decided not to stop for any lunch at noon but to push right along. If there was any eating place in the town they could get a bite before leaving; and the change from camp fare might be agreeable to them all.

At two o'clock they reached the place, which was hardly of respectable size, although it had a station and post office. The first thing the boys did was to head for this latter place and ask for mail, which was handed out after the old man had slowly gone over several packages. Strangers were such a novelty in that Nevada railroad settlement that the postmaster evidently was consumed with curiosity to know what could have brought four lively looking boys dressed in khaki suits very much on the same pattern as United States regulars, to that

jumping-off place. But they did not bother themselves explaining and he had to take it out in guessing that the Government was so hard pushed for recruits now in the army that they had to enlist boys not fully grown.

While the other boys were eagerly devouring the contents of the various envelopes they had received, bearing the New York post mark, Ned, who had put his own letters in his pocket for later reading, sauntered over to the station to interview the telegraph agent, who was also the ticket man, express agent and filled various other offices as well after the usual custom of these small towns.

It was only a short time later that Jack, Harry and Jimmy, still devouring the long letters they had received, in which all the news of the home circles was retailed, saw Ned walking briskly toward them.

"He's struck something or other that's given him reason to chirk up," announced the observant Jimmy, as he took a shrewd look at Ned's face on the scout master drawing near. "Ten to one he's had word from the head of the Secret Service in Washington. It'd sure be pretty punk now if after comin' so far over deserts and the like to visit your uncle, we had to drop off here and take the train back to Los Angeles, so Ned could help gather in some gang of counterfeiters or look up a bunch of smugglers bringing

the Heathen Chinese across the Mexican border while all that fighting is goin' on down there between Villa and Huerta."

Ned quickly joined them. They could see from the alert look on his face that something must have happened since he left them shortly before to arouse Ned. His eyes shone with resolution and he had the look that appears on a hunter's face when he discovers the track of the animal he had long wanted to bag.

"Did you find a message waiting for you here, Ned?" asked Harry.

"Just what I did," came the reply.

"Then it must have been from Washington?" suggested Jack, anxiously. "But let's hope for Harry's sake it won't call you off from this scheme we've got started."

"That's the strangest thing of it all," replied Ned; "because, you see, this message was meant to send me from Los Angeles straight down into this very section of the Colorado River country."

CHAPTER III.

THE HELPING HAND.

When Ned made this announcement the others exchanged looks in which wonder struggled with curiosity.

"Tell me about that, now," muttered Jimmy; "was there ever anything like the luck that chases after us all the while? Here we start out to visit Harry's uncle, so he might carry out a mission that his folks sent him on, and of course the Government must a guessed all about it, since they went and laid a game to be hatched out right in the same part of the Wild and Wooly West. Can you beat it?"

"Let Ned tell us what the game is, can't you, Jimmy?" demanded Harry.

"Yes, and please don't break in again with your remarks until he's all through," added Jack. "It bothers a fellow to make connections when you get started. If you must talk, why, we'll throw in and hire a hall for the occasion. Now, Ned, tell us what the Secret Service folks want you to do."

"I've had a message in cipher from my people in Washington, telling me that while I'm out

in this section they'd like me to look up one Clem Parsons, who's been wanted for a long time on the charge of counterfeiting Government notes. When last heard from he was running a stage line somewhere in the country of the Colorado and doing a little in the way of fleecing unsuspecting travelers who come out here to see the wonders of the Canyon. So from now on we'll begin to ask questions and see whether we can get on the trail of this gentleman who's given some of the smartest agents in the Secret Service the call-down."

"And then they have to depend on Ned Nestor and his able assistant, Jimmy McGraw," remarked the last mentioned scout; "excuse me, fellers, but if you don't blow your own horn, who d'ye reckon'll be fool enough to do it for you? But Ned, if our luck holds as good as it generally does, chances are ten to one this same Clem Parsons will come tumbling right up against us. It seems like you might be a magnet and they all have to come our way sooner or later."

"Any description of what he looks like?" asked Jack, who had known Ned to get similar orders on previous occasions and could guess that it was not all left to his imagination.

"Yes, they tell me he is tall and thin and has a scar on his left cheek. He used to be a cow puncher at one time and might be working at his old trade now. That's a point to remember

when we get to the Double Cross Ranch. Every puncher will have to run the gantlet of our eyes and if one of them happens to be marked with a scar on his left cheek, it'll be a bad day for him."

"Now, wouldn't it be queer if we *did* run across the mutt there at your uncle's place, Harry?" remarked Jimmy. "But here we are again, Ned, uniting business with pleasure like we've done heaps of times before now. Mr. Clem Parsons, I'm sure sorry for you when this combination gets started to work, because you've *got* to come in out of the wet and that's all there is to it!"

It might appear that Jimmy was much given to boasting; but as a rule he made good, so that this failing might be forgiven by those who knew him and his propensity for joking.

They moved out of town after getting a pretty poor apology for a lunch at the tavern. Jimmy declared that he would starve on such fare and announced his intention of immediately opening a box of crackers he had purchased at a local store so as to keep himself from suffering.

Ned, as was his habit, had interviewed about everybody that crossed his path, so as to improve upon the rude map he carried and which he had found to be faulty on several occasions, which fact caused him to distrust it as a guide.

"We ought to make the ranch by tomorrow

evening, if all goes well," he told his three chums, as they walked onward over the plain, still heading almost due southwest.

"Not much danger of anything upsetting our calculations from now on," observed Jack, "unless we meet up with drunken punchers, run acorss some bad men who have been chased by the sheriff's posse out of the railroad towns and who try to make a living by holding up travelers once in six months; or else get caught in a fine old prairie fire."

"Say, that last could happen, that's right," Jack went on to exclaim, looking a little uneasily at the dead grass that in places completely concealed the greener growth underneath. "If a big gale was blowing and a spark should get into this stuff she would go awhooping along as fast as a train could run. That's something I've often read about and thought I'd like to see, but come to think of it, now that I'm on the ground, I don't believe I care much about it after all."

"They say it's a grand sight," Harry volunteered; "but according to my mind a whole lot depends on which side of the fire you happen to be. What's interesting to some might even mean death to others."

"Yes, I've read lots about the same," admitted Jack, "and of the trouble people have had in saving themselves when chased by one of

these fires on the plains. If we do see one of the same here's hoping we are to windward of the big blaze."

When the sun sank that evening they were hurrying to reach what seemed to be a stream of some sort, judging from the line of trees that cut across the plain and which only grow where there is more or less water to be had.

The three burros must have scented the presence of water, for there was no keeping the animals within bounds. They increased their pace until they were almost on the run; and Jimmy threw away the fag end of a whip with which he had been amusing himself by tickling the haunches of the burro in his charge and urging him to move along faster.

One of the animals started to bray in a fashion that could have been easily heard half a mile or more away.

Hardly had the discordant sounds died away than the boys were considerably surprised to hear a shrill voice coming from directly ahead, as though the exultant bray of the pack animal had given warning of their presence to some one who needed assistance the worst kind.

"Help! Come quick and get me! Help—help!" came the words as clear as a bell and causing Harry and Jimmy to stare at each other as though their first thought might have been along the line of some deception that was being practiced upon them.

But there was Ned already on the jump and shouting over his shoulder as he ran:

"Jimmy, give your burro over to Harry to look after; you too, Jack and follow me on the run!"

"That suits me all right!" cried Jack; "here Harry, please look after my pack!" and with these words he was off at full speed.

Jimmy was close at his heels. He had only waited long enough to snatch his rifle from the top of the pack on the burro that had been given into his charge after his own had been lost in the mountain disaster. Jimmy was always thinking they might be attacked by Indians off their reservation or else run across some bad men who liked to play their guns on strangers just to see them dance. For that reason he seldom if ever allowed himself to be caught far away from his repeating Marlin these days.

When they had pushed into the patch of cottonwoods they found that Ned was already at work trying to lend the assistance that had been so lustily called for in that childish treble.

A figure was in the stream, although just his head and a small portion of his body could be seen. He was stretching out his hands towards Ned in a beseeching manner that at first puzzled Jimmy.

"Why, I declare if it ain't a little boy!" he

exclaimed; "but what's he doin' out there, I want to know? Why don't he come ashore if the water's too deep. What ails the cub, d'ye think, Jack?"

"Don't know—might be quicksand!" snapped the other, as he once more started to hurry forward.

Ned was talking with the stranger now, evidently assuring him that there was no further need of anxiety since they had reached the spot.

"Can't you budge at all?" they heard him ask.

"Not a foot," came the reply; "seems like I mout be jest glued down here for keeps and that's a fact, stranger."

"How long have you been caught there?" asked the scout master.

"Reckon as it mout be half hour er thereabouts," the boy who was held fast in the iron grip of the treacherous quicksand told him; and so far as Jack could see he did not exhibit any startling signs of fright, for he was a boy of the plains and evidently used to running into trouble as well as perilous traps.

"But," Jack broke in with, "you never shouted all that time, or we'd have heard you long before we did?"

"Never let out a yip till I ketched that burro speakin'," the boy replied; "what was the use when I didn't think there was a single person

inside o' five mile? I jest tried and tried to git out but she hung on all the tighter; and the water kept acreepin' up till it'd been over my mouth in ten minutes more I reckon."

"Well, we are going to get you out of that in a hurry, now," Ned told him in a reassuring tone; "Jack, climb up after me, to help pull. Jimmy, you stand by to do anything else that's wanted."

Ned, being a born woodsman, had immediately noted the fact that the limb of a tree exactly overhung the spot where the boy had been trapped in the shifting sand. This made his task the easier; but had it been otherwise he would have found some means for accomplishing his ends, even though he had to make a mattress of bushes and branches on which to safely approach the one in deadly peril.

Creeping out on that stout limb Ned dropped the noose of his rope down to the boy, who was only some six feet below him.

"Put it around under your arms," Ned told him; but as though he understood the method of procedure already, the boy in the sand was even in the act of doing this when Ned spoke.

"Tie the end around the limb and let me pull myself up, Mister, won't you?" the boy pleaded, as though ashamed of having been caught in a trap, and wishing to do something looking to his own release."

This suited Ned just as well, though he meant

to have a hand in the pulling process himself and also give Jack a chance. So when he fastened the rope to the limb of the tree he did so at a point midway between himself and Jack.

"Get hold and pull!" he said in a low tone to his chum; for already was the boy below straining himself with might and main to effect his own release.

It would have proved a much harder task than he contemplated; but the scouts did not mean that he should exhaust himself any further in trying. They managed to get some sort of grip on the rope and then Ned called out cheerily:

"Yo heave-o! here he comes! Yo-heave-o! up with him, Jack! Now, once more, all together for a grand pull—yo-heave-o! Hurrah, he's nearly out of the sand!"

Five seconds later and the energetic boy was scrambling across the limb of the tree; and in as many minutes all of them had descended to the ground, the end accomplished and nobody much the worse for the experience.

"It was a close call for me, that's sure," the boy was saying, as he gravely went around and shook hands with each one of the scouts, not excepting Harry, who had meanwhile come up, leading the three burros; "an' I want you all to know I'm glad that donkey let out his whoop when he did. Why, I might a been all

under when you got here; but say, I lost my gun and that makes me mad."

Looking at the boy more closely they were struck with the fact that while he did not seem to be more than nine years old, he was dressed like a cow-puncher and had a resolute air. How much of this was assumed in order to impress them with the idea that he had not been alarmed in the least by his recent peril, of course no one could say. Ned was wondering how the boy, brought up undoubtedly amidst such perils and on the lookout for danger all the while, could have fallen into such a silly little trap as this.

"What were you doing in the stream that you stood there and let the sand suck you in?" he asked as he proceeded to help the boy scrape himself off so as to appear more presentable.

"I was a little fool, all right," the kid immediately answered, with an expression of absolute disgust on his sharp face; "you see, I glimpsed a bunch of deer feeding just over yonder to windward and as they were headin' in this way I thought I'd lie low under the river bank and wait till they got inside easy gunshot. I tied my pony over in the thickest place of the timber and then walked out to where the water just come to my knees, where I got low down to wait. Say, I was that taken up with watchin' them deer afeedin' up that I forgets

all about everything else and was some s'prised to feel the water tricklin' around my waist like. After that I knowed the huntin' game was all up, and that less I wanted to be smothered I'd have to get out in a hurry. But it didn't matter much how I pulled, an' heaved and tried to swim I jest stuck like I was bolted down to a snubbin' post and somebody had cinched the girth on me. Then, after a while, when I was expectin' to swaller water, I heard that burro singin' and afore I could help it I jest hollored out. Guess you must a thought it was a maverick. I could a kicked myself right away afterwards 'cause I give tongue so wild like!"

Ned smiled. He realized that the cub had imbibed the spirit of the Indian warrior who disdains to display any weakness of the flesh. No matter how much he may have been frightened by his recent terrible predicament, he did not choose any one to know about it. Indians may *feel* fear but they have learned never to show it by look or action and to go to their deaths, if need be, taunting the foe.

"Well," he told the small boy, "we intended to camp for the night here close to the river and we'd be glad to have you stay over with us. Plenty of grub for everybody and it might be much more pleasant than being by yourself. We are not Western boys but then we've been around more or less and know something about

how things are done out here. Will you join us—er—"

"My name is Amos, Amos Adams, and I'll be right well pleased to stay over with you to-night, sure I will," the boy went on to say.

So it was settled, and out of just such small things as their meeting Amos in such a strange way great events sometimes spring. But none of the scouts so much as suspected this when they busied themselves preparing the camp, building the cooking fire, and seeing that all the animals were staked out to feed, after watering them.

CHAPTER IV.

PICKING UP POINTS.

"Ned, whatever do you imagine this kid is doing out here all by himself?"

Jack asked this question in a low tone. They had cooked supper, and disposed of it promptly; and there had been an abundance for the guest, as well as the four chums. And now the two scouts were lounging near the fire, while Jimmy and Amos cleaned up the tin dishes and cooking utensils; Harry meanwhile being busily engaged with some notes he wanted to jot down for future use, in comparing his recent experiences with those of others who had suffered tortures in the notorious Death Valley.

"Well, you've heard as much of his talk as any of us, Jack," replied the leader of the expedition, quietly, "and so far there's been nothing said about himself. I'm going to beckon to Amos to come over here, and put a few leading questions to him. Out here when a fellow is entertained at the camp fire, it's only fair that he give some sort of an account of himself. Besides, Amos looks so much like a kid, just as you say, that it makes the thing seem queer."

A minute later, catching the eye of the boy, he crooked his finger and nodded his head. Plainly Amos understood, for he immediately came across.

"Sit down, Amos," Ned told him.

The small boy in the cowboy suit did so, at the same time allowing a sort of smile to come upon his bronzed face.

"Want to know somethin' about me, I reckon?" he remarked, keenly.

Jack chuckled as though amused at his shrewdness; but Ned only said:

"Well, ordinarily out here on the plains I understand that men seldom express any curiosity about their chance guests; it isn't always a safe thing to do. But you see, Amos, in your case it's different."

"Sure it is; I get on to that, Mr. Scout Master," replied the boy, readily; for he had ere this noticed the emblem which Ned bore upon his khaki coat, and which stamped him as authorized to answer to this name; which would indicate that Amos knew something about the Boy Scout business.

"In the first place we chanced to be of some little assistance to you."

"A heap!" broke in the other, quickly.

"And then, excuse me for saying it, but you are such a kid that anybody would be surprised to run across you out by yourself, carrying a

gun, riding a pony like the smartest puncher going, and after big game at the time you got stuck in that quicksand—all of which, Amos, must be our excuse for feeling that we'd like to hear something about you."

"That's only fair and square, Ned," the boy spoke up immediately; "Jimmy there has been telling me the greatest lot of stuff about what you fellows have been doing all over, that I'd think he was stuffing me, only he held up his hand right in the start, and declared he never told anything but the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help him. And I'm ready to tell you who I am, and what I'm adoin' out here."

"Not that we think you're anything that you shouldn't be, Amos," put in Jack.

"Well, my name's Amos Adams, just like I said, and all my life I've been around a cattle ranch. That's why I know so much about roping steers, and riding buckin' broncs. I guess I was in a saddle before my ma weaned me. There are a few things mebbe I can't quite do as well as some of these here prize punchers, but it's only because I ain't as strong as them, that's all."

Looking at his confident face the scouts believed that Amos was only speaking the plain truth.

"My dad's name is Hy Adams," continued

the kid puncher. "I guess you ain't been around these diggin's much yet, or you'd a heard who he is. They call him the Bad Man of the Bittersweets, and when he raises his foghorn of a voice lots of men that think themselves brave just give a hitch to their shoulders this way," and he imitated it to the life as he spoke, "and does what he tells 'em. That's when he's been drinkin'. But then there are other times—oh, well, I reckon, I hadn't ought to tell family secrets.

"We live in a cabin, 'bout ten miles away from here. My dad, he's in the cattle business, when he don't loaf. Sometimes he's 'round home, and agin he ain't, just 'cordin' to how things are agoin'. Mam, she's a little woman, but she knows how to run the house. I gotter sister, too, younger'n me, and her name it's Polly. I ain't gone to school any to speak of, but mam, she kinder teaches me, when I ain't ridin' out on the range, or totin' my gun on a hunt. That makes me mad to think I lost my gun in the drink there."

"No use hunting for it in the morning, I should think?" suggested Jack.

"Nary bit," the boy replied quickly; "it's down under that shiftin' sand long before now. But then she was an old gun, and I'm savin' up to git a new six-shot rifle, so it don't need to be long now before I'll be heeled agin."

"Is your father a rancher, then, Amos?" Jack went on to ask, idly.

The boy grinned and looked at him queerly.

"Well," he replied, with a quaint drawl that amused the scouts, "I don't know as you could call him that way, exactly. He's been cow puncher, and nigh everything else a man c'n be down thisaway to make a livin'. Me and my awful dad we don't git on well. That's one reason I gen'rally skips out when he takes a notion to lay 'round home for a spell. He knows right well I ain't afeard of him, if he has got the name of bein' a holy terror. I happen to belong to the same fambly. 'Sides, he ain't what you'd call my real and true dad."

"Oh! I see, you adopted him, did you, Amos?" Jack asked, laughingly.

"My mam she married agin after pop he was planted, and they went an' changed my name from Scroggins to Adams. I don't know which I likes best; but Scroggins that's honest, anyway, which Adams ain't—leastways some people around this region say it ain't. When I grows up I reckon I'll be a Scroggins, or else get a new name."

Again the scouts exchanged amused glances. Amos was certainly a most entertaining little chap, with his quaint sayings.

"Now, you see, dad never comes home alone any more, but fetches some of his cronies along with him, and there's unpleasant scenes ahappenin' all the time; which is one of the rea-

sons why I skip out. They gets to drinkin', too, purty hard, till mam she has to douse a bucket of water over each puncher, and start 'em off. Mam she don't approve of the kinds of business that dad takes up. But he keeps amakin' these here visits to home further apart all the while, 'cause things ain't as pleasant as they might be. Some time mebbe he won't come no more. I'm bankin' on that, which is one reason I ain't never laid a hand on him when he gets roarin' like a mad bull. There are others, too, but I wont mention the same."

Amos had apparently been very frank with his new friends. He seemed to have taken a great fancy for them all, and, in turn, asked many questions concerning their expected visit to Harry's uncle on Double Cross Ranch, which place he knew very well.

The conversation by degrees became general, and finally the scouts went on to talk about their own affairs. During this exchange of opinions, it happened that the name of Clem Parsons was mentioned by Ned. Perhaps it would be hardly fair to call it "chance," when in reality the scout master wanted to find out whether the kid puncher seemed to be familiar with the name of the man whom the Government authorities in Washington wished him to round up.

The bait took, for immediately he heard Amos say:

"What's that, Clem Parsons? Say, I happen to know a man by that name, and he's been over to our house lots of times, too."

"Then he's a puncher, is he?" asked Ned.

"Well, I reckon he has been 'bout everything in his day, for I've heard him say so," came the reply. "He rides with my awful dad, an' they seem to git on together, which is some queer, because most of 'em is that skeered o' dad they tries to steer clear o' him."

"My! but this dad of yours must be a grizzly bear, Amos?" remarked Jimmy, who had been greatly impressed with what he heard the boy say.

"Just you wait till you see him, that's all," was what Amos told him. "Mam, she reckons as how 'twas this same Clem Parsons as had got dad to ridin' 'round the kentry doin' things that might git him into trouble, an' she hates him like pizen, for the same. Since they got to goin' together, dad he's allers showing plenty of the long-green, which he never handled before. But I ain't tellin' fambly secrets, and I reckons I'd better shut up shop."

He had said enough, however, to convince Ned and Jack that he strongly suspected his stepfather of having joined forces with a band of cattle theives who were stealing the fattest beeves neighboring ranchers owned, and selling them on the side.

There is always this temptation existing when cattle are raised on the range, often feeding for days and weeks many miles away from the ranch house, and scattered among the little valleys where the grass grows greenest. In the darkness of the night, a few of these experienced rustlers can cut out what they want of a herd, and drive them far away, effectually concealing the trail. Then the brands are changed adroitly, and the cattle shipped away to be sold in a distant market.

So long as this lawless business can be carried on successfully, it brings in big money to the reckless rustlers; but if discovered in the act they are usually treated with scant ceremony by the angry punchers and shot down like wolves.

To some men the fascination of the life causes them to ignore its perils. Then besides, the fact that money pours in upon them with so little effort, is a temptation they are unable to resist. So long as there are ranches, and cattle to be raised for the market, there will be men who go wrong and try to get a fat living off those who do the work.

It did not surprise Ned to learn that this clever rascal, whom he had been asked to look up and apprehend if possible, had for the time being forsaken the counterfeiting game and started on a new lay. Clem Parsons was no one idea man. His past fairly bristled with shrewd

devices, whereby he deluded the simple public and eluded the detectives sent out by the Secret Service to enmesh him.

He had played the part of moonshiner, smuggler, and bogus moneymaker for years, and snapped his fingers at the best men on the pay roll of the Government. Now, if as seemed possible, he had turned cattle rustler, perhaps there might come a complete change in the programme; for if the irate ranchmen and their faithful punchers only got on a hot trail with Clem at the other end, the authorities at Washington might be saved much further anxiety; for a man who has been strung up to a telegraph pole and riddled with bullets is not apt to give any one trouble again.

Ned had learned some important facts that were apt to prove more or less valuable to him presently. Already he felt that they had been paid many times over for the little effort it had taken to rescue Amos from the sand of the shallow river.

Scouts are taught to do a good deed without any thought of a return; but all the same, it is pleasant to know that the reward does often come, and if any of the four chums had failed to find a chance to turn his badge right-side up that day, on account of having given a helping hand to some one, certainly they must feel entitled to that privilege after lifting Amos out of

his sad predicament. Saving a precious human life must surely be counted as answering the requirements of the scout law.

When Amos, a little later, left them to saunter down to the brink of the river, in order to give his mottled pony a last drink before leaving him at the end of his rope to crop grass the remainder of the night, Jack turned to the scout master and gave expression to his convictions as follows:

"Well, it looks like your old luck holds good, Ned, and that you stand a chance of running across your game the very first thing after getting here. If this Clem Parsons Amos tells us about turns out to be the same man the Government wants you to tackle, he'll be walking into the net any old time from now on. Why, we may run across him tomorrow or the day afterwards, who knows?"

"He's the right party," said Ned, quietly. "I asked Amos if he had a scar on his cheek, and he said it gave Clem a look as though he was grinning all the time, a sort of sneering expression, I imagine. And as you say, Jack, I'm in great luck to strike a hot trail so early in the hunt. Given the chance, and I'll have Mr. Clem Parsons on the way to Los Angeles, by rail, with a hop, skip and a jump."

"He's a nifty character, all right," remarked Jimmy; "and trains with a hard crowd out here, so we'll all have to pitch in and help lift him.

Four of us, armed with rifles as we are, ought to be enough to flag him."

"One thing in our favor," ventured Jack, "is that he'll never for a minute dream of being afraid of a pack of Boy Scouts. While he might keep a suspicious eye on every strange man he meets, and his hand ready to draw a gun, he'll hardly give us a second look. That's where we can get the bulge on Clem, and his ignorance is going to be his undoing yet."

"Perhaps we'd better be a little careful how we mention these things while Amos is around," Ned went on to say.

"But sure, you don't think that little runt would peach on us, do you?" demanded Jimmy, who had apparently taken a great liking for the diminutive puncher.

"Certainly not," answered Ned, "but you understand one of the things that goes to make a successful Secret Service operator is in knowing how to keep his own counsel. He's got to learn all he can about others, and tell as little about himself as will carry him through. So please keep quiet about my wanting to invite this Clem Parsons to an interview with the Collector in Los Angeles."

Jimmy promptly raised his hand.

"I'm on," he said. "Mum's the word till you lift the embargo, Ned. But it begins to look like we might have some interestin' happenings ahead

of us, from what we know about this Clem Parsons, and what we guess is agoin' on between the ranchers and the cattle rustlers. I thought all the froth had blown off the top, after we quit that Death Valley, but now I'm beginnin' to believe we're agoin' to scratch gravel again right smart. Which suits Jimmy McGraw all right, because he's built that way, and never did like to see the green mould set on top of the pond. Keep things astirrin', that's my way. When folks go to sleep, give the same a punch, and start something doin'."

"Well," said Harry, looking up from his work close by, "if you have a few more narrow squeaks like that one to-day up on the mountain trail, it won't be long before they plant *you* under the daisies," but Jimmy only laughed at the warning.

CHAPTER V.

AROUND THE CAMP FIRE.

It was a lovely night, with the moon looking almost as round as a big yellow cart-wheel when it rose in the east, where the horizon lay low, with the level plain and sky meeting.

Besides, it was not nearly as hot there on the plains as they had found it back where the sands of the Mojave Desert shifted with the terrible winds that seemed to come from the regions of everlasting fire, they scorched so.

The scouts appeared to be enjoying themselves so much that even Jimmy, usually the sleepy member of the party, gave no sign of wanting to crawl under his brilliant and beloved Navaje blanket.

Near by the three pack animals were tethered, along with the calico pony owned by Amos. They cropped the grass as though they could never get enough of the same. Everything seemed so very peaceful that one would find it difficult to imagine that there could come any change to the scene.

Amos had joined the circle again, and once more the conversation had become general. Ned

asked numerous questions concerning the ranch which they expected to visit, and in this way they learned in advance considerable about the puncher gang, some of the peculiarities of various members of the same, as well as the floating news of the region.

When Amos was asked about the hunting he gave glowing accounts of the sport to be had by those willing to ride twenty miles or more to the coulies of the foothills, where a panther or a grizzly bear might be run across, and deer were to be stalked.

"How about wolves?" Jimmy wanted to know.

Jimmy always declared war on wolves. He had had some experiences with the treacherous animals in the past, and could not forget. There was a standing grudge between them, and every time Jimmy found a chance he liked to knock over a gray prowler.

Amos shrugged his narrow shoulders as though he took very little stock in such cowardly animals.

"Oh! the punchers they have a round-up for the critters every fall, an' so you see they kind of keep 'em low in stock. Then besides, ever since they took to payin' a bounty for wolf scalps, men go out to hunt for the same when they ain't got nothin' else to do. They ain't aplenty about this part of the country nowadays. I reckon as how that's why Wolf Harkness took to raisin' the critters."

"What's that, raising wolves, do you mean, Amos? Sure you must be kiddin'?" was the way Jimmy greeted this announcement.

"Not me, Jimmy; it's plain United States I'm giving you, sure I am," the other insisted.

"But there ain't no great call for wolf pelts, like there is for black fox and 'coon, and otter, and skunks and that sort of thing. How d'ye s'pose this Wolf Harkness makes it pay?"

"Oh! that's easy," replied Amos, carelessly. "You see, he kills off a certain number of his stock once in so often and sells the skins. Then later on they reckon that he collects the bounty for wolf scalps from the State."

"But say, that looks kind of queer for any man to raise pests, and then expect to make the State pay him so much for every one he kills," Jimmy remarked, shaking his head as though he found it difficult to believe.

"Don't know how he manages," the boy continued. "Heard some say that the law, it left a loophole for such practices, and that they couldn't stop him. Others kind of think he sells the scalps to some hunter, who collects for the same. But everybody just knows Harkness does get a heap of cash out of his queer business."

"Ever been to his pen and seen his stock?" asked Jimmy.

"Yes, once I happened that way, but the smell drove me away. There must have been thirty

or more wolves in the stockade right then, and they looked like they was pretty nigh starved, too. I dreamed that night they broke loose and got me cornered in an empty cabin. I barred the door, but they pushed underneath and clumb through the broken windows, and everywhere I looked I saw red tongues and pale yellow eyes! Then I woke up, and was scared near stiff, for there was a pair of eyes in the dark right alongside me in the loft at home. But say, that turned out to be only our old black cat."

All of them laughed with Amos, as though they could fully appreciate the scare he must have received on that occasion.

The subject of the wolf farm seemed to have interested Jimmy intensely, for he went on asking more questions concerning the raising of the animals, what they were fed on, the price of wolf pelts, and a lot more along the same lines until finally Harry turned to Ned and complained.

"Tell him to change the subject, won't you, Ned? He'll have the lot of us dreaming we're beset by a horde of wolves. And you'd better make him draw all the charges out of his gun to-night, because he's sure to sit up and begin blazing away, to keep from being dragged off. Jimmy's got a big imagination, you know, and every once in a while it runs away with him."

"Tell me," announced Jimmy, rather indignantly, "who's got a better right to be askin'

questions about the habits of the animals than me, who's a member of that same Wolf Patrol? How can you expect a feller to give the right kind of a *howl* when he wants to signal to his mates, unless he finds out all these things."

"Oh! if that's the worst you are after, Jimmy, go ahead and find out," Jack was heard to say, condescendingly. "I thought you had a more serious scheme in that head of yours than just accumulating knowledge."

Jimmy turned and looked at him suspiciously.

"And what did you think I had up me sleeve, if it's a fair question?" he asked.

"Why, you see," began Jack, with a twinkle in his eye, "I was afraid that you might want to invest what money you've got saved in starting a wolf ranch of your own, or trying to buy this old man Harkness out. I supposed that was why you wanted to know the exact value of wolf hides, and what the State paid bounty on scalps. But I'm just as glad to find that you're not bothering your head over the business part of the game. Perhaps you'd like to meet up with this Harkness, thinking he might give you a chance to shoot his collection of hungry wolves. That would be a snap for a fellow who hates the beasts like you do, and has made a vow to never let one get past him, when he had a gun handy or a stone to heave."

Jimmy only grinned. He did not know whether Jack was joking or not, but there seemed to be something complimentary in his way of talking; and Jimmy was not at all averse to being known as a champion wolf killer.

"I only hope I get a chance to see this Harkness and his bunch of slick critters before we quit this neck of the woods," he remarked. "But as I ain't a butcher you needn't think that I'd ask him to let me cut down his list with my new Marlin gun. Out in the open I'm death on the sneakers every time; but it'd go against my grain to knock 'em over, when they hadn't got any show for their money. I never could do the axe business for a chicken at home, even when we were livin' in the country."

"Oh! well, you must excuse me for speaking of such a thing, Jimmy," said Jack, with assumed gravity; "I was mistaken, that's all, in sizing you up. Appearances are often deceitful, you know, and things don't always turn out as they seem. Now, few people looking at you would ever dream that they were gazing on a marvelous phenomenon. I guess you caught that trick from association with Ned, here," and Jack might have continued along that vein still further had he not been nudged sharply by the scout master, and heard Ned mutter:

"Mum's the word, Jack. Don't tell all you know!"

This brought him to his senses, for he remembered that there was a stranger present, and that it had been decided not to expose their full hand to the gaze of Amos, at least for the present.

In this fashion the time passed.

All of the scouts were in a humor to vote that one of the most delightful camps they had ever been in. Perhaps this partly arose from the great contrast it afforded when compared with recent nights passed under the most trying of conditions, when crossing the desert, and the terrible valley lying to the east of it.

Amos had a blanket along with him. Apparently the lad was accustomed to sleeping by himself on the open plain, and always went prepared. Things were not as pleasant as they might be at his cabin home, frequently enough; and besides this, he must be possessed of a wandering nature, feeling perfectly satisfied to take care of himself, and capable of doing it, too.

They were still lying around the dying fire, and each waiting for some one else to take the lead in mentioning such a thing as going to sleep, when Amos suddenly sat upright.

Ned noticed that he had his head cocked on one side, and appeared to be in the attitude of listening for a repetition of some sound that may have struck his acute hearing.

"There it comes again," Amos remarked. "You see, the wind has veered around that way

more or less; but say, twelve miles as the crow flies is pretty hefty of a distance to hear that pack give tongue, seems to me."

Ned had caught it that time.

"You must mean the wolves that Harkness keeps shut up in his pen for breeding purposes, is that it, Amos?" he inquired.

"Nothing more nor less than that," came the reply.

"There, I caught it as plain as anything then!" acknowledged Jimmy, with a vein of triumph and satisfaction in his voice, as though he did not mean to be left at the post, when the whole bunch was running swiftly.

"Whew! they do make a racket, when they're excited, for a fact!" declared Jack.

"Is it the wolves you're talking about?" asked Harry.

"Don't you be hearing the noise beyond there?" Jimmy asked him. "P'raps now, meat is so scarce that the old man's put his pets on half rations, and the whoopin' we hear is meant for a protest."

"Well, what of that?" Jack wanted to know; "I guess you'd raise a bigger howl than that, Jimmy, if we tried to put *you* on half rations. I can fancy how you'd be trying to lift the roof off, and they'd have to call the fire company out to soak you with their hose so as to make you

stop. But don't get alarmed, Jimmy, because none of us have any intention that way."

They sat there and listened for several minutes. No doubt, Jimmy was endeavoring to picture in his mind what the den of trapped wolves must look like; and at the same time, he was promising himself once more to try and visit the Harkness place before leaving the country. He would like to be able to say he had set eyes on so strange a thing as a wolf ranch.

Harry began to yawn, and stretch tremendously.

"What ails you fellows; don't any of you expect to crawl into your blankets and pick up a little sleep? Talking may be all very well, but it doesn't rest you up any. Ned, why don't you tell Jimmy to sound taps, all lights out so the rest of us can adjourn? As long as Jimmy's afloat to do the grand talking act, it isn't any use trying to go to sleep, because you just can't."

Jimmy seemed ready to take up that challenge, and entered upon an argument calculated to prove that he was a mild mannered individual alongside of some people he could mention, though not wanting to give names. Ned, however, put his foot down.

"Harry's right this time, Jimmy, and you know it. So make up your mind to simmer down, and keep the rest for another time. We'll find a soft spot and see how well this ground lies.

And we ought to make up some for lost sleep to-night, with that soft breeze blowing, and the air getting fresher right along."

At that plain invitation Jimmy began to make his blanket ready, for he never liked seeing any one crawl in ahead of him any more than he did to be the first one up in the morning.

Amos still sat there. Ned, looking at the boy, saw that there was a little frown on his forehead, as though he did not exactly like something or other.

"What's wrong, Amos?" he asked, quietly.

"The breeze, it is no stronger than before, you can see, Ned," the kid puncher replied, as he held up his wet forefinger, after the fashion of range riders and plainsmen in general.

"That's true enough," replied the scout master, always willing to pick up points in woodcraft, for he did not pretend to know everything there was going.

"But listen!" added Amos; "it is much louder now, you see."

Ned became intensely interested at once.

"You are right," he remarked, "the sound of that wolfish howling does come three times as loud as in the start, and yet the wind couldn't be the reason of that. Do you know what makes it, Amos?"

"I could give a guess, mebbe."

"As how?" continued Ned, while Jack and Jimmy and Harry all stopped their preparations for fixing their blankets to suit their in-

dividual wants, in order to hear what the kid puncher would say.

"When I was over there at the wolf ranch," Amos commenced, "I remember now that I noticed the pen looked old and weak. I asked the hunter about it, and he said it'd hold, he guessed; that wolves, they didn't have the intelligence of hosses, or even cattle, so as to make a combined rush at a weak place."

"Well?" Ned remarked, as Amos paused.

"It might be that somethin' happened to make that weak place in the big pen give way, and the whole pack is loose, acomin' for the river, hungry as all get-out, and ready to attack anything that walks on two legs, because they are nearly starved!"

When Amos gave this as his opinion, the scouts who had been getting their blankets ready for a quiet night's sleep seemed suddenly to lose all interest in the proceedings. Instead Jimmy started reaching around him for that new Marlin repeating rifle, which had already proven its worth on several occasions.

"Whew!" they could hear him saying, almost breathlessly to himself; "thirty hungry wolves, all at a pop, hey? That's what I call crowding the mourners. I may be set on knockin' over an occasional critter when I run across the same; but say, I ain't so greedy as all that. Think I'm in the wholesale line, do you? Well, you've got another guess acomin' to you, that's all?"

CHAPTER VI.

THE WOLF PACK.

"What can we do, Ned?" asked Jack.

Jimmy was not the only one now who had seized hold of his gun, for the other three scouts could be seen gripping their rifles. Only poor Amos was without his rifle, though he carried a revolver, cowboy fashion, attached to his belt.

"It's out of the question for us to get away," replied the scout master; "because we only have three poor burros, and they'd be overtaken before they'd gone a mile."

"Yes," added Jimmy, "and don't forget there's four of us, Ned, darlint."

"Amos could skip out if he feels like it, because his pony has fleet heels, and might outrun the wolf pack?" Jack suggested.

"But all the same Amos is agoin' to hang around, and take pot luck with the rest of the bunch," remarked the kid puncher, quietly.

"But how about the animals," asked Harry, nervously; "do we leave them to be pulled down by the savage beasts of prey? All of us could shinny up some of these trees, but burros can't climb."

"Huh, I've seen the time when I thought they could do everything but fly," grunted Jimmy; "and I wasn't so sure about that, either."

"We might bring them in close and stand guard over the poor things," Ned went on to say.

At that they hurried to where the four animals were tethered. Already something seemed to have told the burros and the calico pony that danger hovered in that breeze, for they were beginning to show signs of excitement, and it was not such an easy job after all to lead them in close to the dying camp fire.

Hastily they were firmly secured.

"Will the ropes hold if they get to cutting up?" Harry asked, after he had tied his as many as five different times, to make sure there would be no slipping of the knot.

"They are all good and practically new," Ned informed him, "and I think there's no doubt about their holding. Now to get ourselves fixed. Pick your tree, everybody, but let it be where you can keep watch over the animals, so as to knock over every wolf that makes a jump for them."

They caught on to the idea Ned had in mind. This was to occupy, say as many as three trees that chanced to grow in a triangle around the fire and the spot where the burros and pony had been fastened.

The bright moon would give them all needed opportunity to see any movement on the part of the assailants, and woe to the daring wolf that ventured to cross the dead line.

Ned waited to see which trees the others would pick out before choosing his own place of refuge. He did this because he thought it good policy to have their forces scattered, as by that means they could guard the camp more surely.

As they went on with these preparations, looking to the repulse of invading hosts of sleek gray-coated beasts of prey, they could hear the fiendish chorus of wolfish howls drawing steadily nearer all the while. There may have been a lingering doubt in the mind of Jack or Harry concerning the accuracy of that guess on the part of Amos, but it was gone by this time. Those constantly increasing howls had convinced them beyond all question.

Jimmy had picked out his tree easily enough. Indeed, it was a habit of his these times to settle in his mind just what tree would make the best harbor of refuge in case of a sudden necessity. This he always did as soon as a camp had been decided upon. Jimmy was wont to say with considerable pride that he was only following out the customary scout law "be prepared," which might cover the case, as it does many others.

He seemed to have little trouble about climb-

ing into this tree, first pushing up his Marlin gun, and then the beloved Navajo blanket with its bright colors; for Jimmy did not mean to leave his personal possessions to the mercy of the thievish pack that had broken bounds and was wildly hunting for food.

He climbed after the rest, and it happened that no one else had picked on that particular tree for their refuge, so that Jimmy was going to have it all to himself.

The lower limbs grew rather close to the ground, Jimmy now realized; and he began to wonder whether he had after all been wise in choosing such a tree. Would he be in any danger from the sharp teeth and claws of the wolves when they came rushing up? Jimmy did not believe that wolves could climb trees; but all the same he did not feel altogether easy about it. Still, when he found himself clutching his trusty gun new confidence seemed to be born in his soul.

"Let 'em come if they want to," he said aloud, between his set teeth. "If they will have it, I guess I'll be able to take care of the lot. Every bullet ought to count for a victim; and, mebbe, now I'll be able to see if the bully gun can't send the lead through a couple at one time. It's passed through a six-inch tree, and that's goin' some, let me tell you. My stars! but don't they yap to beat the band. And say, they can't be

more'n a mile away right now, I should think."

The thought was enough to make his blood leap through his veins with renewed excitement. In imagination, Jimmy already began to picture himself blazing away as fast as he could work the mechanism of his modern firearm; and, of course, bowling over a fresh victim with every discharge.

"Jimmy!"

That was Harry calling.

"Hello, there!" replied the one addressed.

"Did you think to grab up the grub and take it up with you?" continued Harry.

"Oh! thunder!"

Jimmy was all broken up by this sudden intelligence. The others had apparently expected him to look out for the food supply, because Jimmy was always ready to take this burden on his shoulders.

And now, alas, what had seemed to be everyone's duty had proved to be no one's; their precious supply of food was left unguarded at the foot of that central tree, close to which the burros and pony had been hitched.

Could he reach it, and get back before the advance gray runner arrived on the scene, bringing his appetite with him and, likewise, his teeth well sharpened for business?

Jimmy came to a conclusion almost instantly, and having a convenient crotch in which he

could leave his gun and blanket, he dropped down from his perch.

"Hey! get back there!" shouted Jack; "don't you hear the pack coming along? They'll get you, Jimmy! Climb up again!"

But Jimmy, undismayed, was already making a bolt for the spot where he could see the pack he knew contained pretty much all the food they had left. He had to face one of two evils; and to Jimmy's mind, it was far worse to run the chances of being starved to death than to accept the risk of the wolves coming up before he could climb into his tree of refuge again.

Jimmy knew what it was to suffer the pangs of hunger; and as he had never yet been bitten by wolves, he decided according to his light.

There was surely need of haste, as he knew while bending over the package which he meant to save. The clamor of wolfish tongues was very close at hand, and with what seemed to be a full dozen joining in the yelping orgy it certainly went to make up a fiendish noise.

He could hear the rush of jumping forms through the underbrush as though those eager animals had already scented what they considered their prey, and were straining every nerve in the endeavor to beat each other to the spot.

Jimmy in turning after securing the bundle had the misfortune to catch his left foot in a projecting root and fall headlong. He felt a

thrill of horror, under the impression that his foot might be gripped fast in the upturned root, and that he would be held in this position until the bounding beasts had reached him, no matter how the other boys poured in a hot fire.

But it was not so bad as that, and when he started to scramble to his feet again, Jimmy found that he could move all right.

He could have made much faster time had he obeyed the order which Ned called out to him, to abandon the packet and make for his tree haven with all speed. But there was that old spirit of obstinacy urging Jimmy to hold what he had, to the bitter end. What would he think of himself in times to come if he remembered that he had tamely submitted to conditions that were not of his own making and abandoned the entire visible food supply for himself and friends to those savage half-famished creatures?

On gaining his feet Jimmy again headed for his tree, gripping the bundle with both arms. That was a sight the other boys would not soon forget; but Ned was not very much surprised, for he knew the nature of his assistant, and had on other occasions witnessed just such specimens of his grit.

"Drop it, Jimmy!" shrieked Harry, afraid that something terrible was about to follow this action on the part of the other scout, because the rush of the coming wolves had increased to a pitch that was next door to terrible.

"Don't do it, Jimmy; we'll hedge you in, all right! Bully boy, Jimmy!" Jack was calling out, for Jack, being much more of a fighter than Harry, could better appreciate the daring feat Jimmy was carrying to a successful end.

Ned did not venture to say anything. He knew the weakness of Jimmy, and how easily he could be "rattled" when others were shouting conflicting appeals to him. And so Ned contented himself with sitting there, holding his gun ready for work and keeping a close watch, so as to discover the very first sign of the leading wolf of the coming pack.

Jimmy was now at his tree, but the next thing was to get the package of food safely lodged up among the limbs, where they formed crotches at the junction with the main trunk.

He tossed it upwards, but was compelled to stretch out his hands and catch it again, pretty much as an eager football player might smother the pigskin oval in his arms on occasion. That wasted just so many seconds, but although he heard the rushing sound coming steadily toward him, Jimmy was game to the core, and would not allow himself to think of giving up his part in the play.

A second time did he give the packet a toss, and this effort had more steam back of it, for the object of his attention went considerably higher. I must have struck a limb, for it re-

bounded back, and once again landed at the feet of Jimmy.

He saw a flitting figure shoot across a little open spot where the moon's rays fell upon the ground; and Jimmy knew full well that this must be the leading wolf, heading straight toward him, through the instinct that draws carniverous animals directly to their intended prey.

Nevertheless, he bent down and deliberately took the package of food in his possession once more, meaning to give a third trial, possibly under the belief that two good attempts deserve another.

This time luck did follow his effort. The packet managed to lodge somewhere among the branches, for certainly it failed to fall back again. And so Jimmy felt that having vindicated his reputation for courage, it was now up to him to look out for himself.

So he commenced to climb. Jimmy had never been one of the best climbers in the troop; for there were quite a number who could, as he would have said, "cut circles all around" him in the tree-tops. But this was a case where he was encouraged to exert himself to the utmost. There was something worth while at stake, for should those famished creatures ever reach him, he might expect them to make short work of their task.

Jimmy under other conditions would doubtless have climbed that tree more gracefully, but he could certainly not have done it in less time than on that present occasion. Speed was everything to him just then, and he was willing to sacrifice agility, grace and make-believe coolness to the one object of avoiding too close acquaintance with the cruel fangs, which he knew must already be snapping and grinding in anticipation of a feast.

Once he slipped and came very near falling back to the ground. He felt a cold chill pass through his whole frame at the bare horror of the thing; then his grip held its own, and he managed to give one more desperate heave that landed him up in the first crotch.

Even there he was not safe. It was too near the ground, and one of those agile jumpers might easily spring that high, with half an effort. So Jimmy, without even waiting to catch a fresh breath, put the spurs in and made another heave.

He had an indistinct view of some object flashing toward his tree, more like a streak of light than a living creature. It must be that leading wolf, crazy to be the first to seize upon the prey they had scented from afar.

Jimmy might have shouted at the beast, in hopes of sending him back in alarm; but, in the first place, he did not have much breath left with which to engineer such a programme. Then again he was not given half a show. Not that

the wolf sprang up, and took hold of his shins, that being the part of Jimmy's anatomy extending further down the tree than any other. Oh! no, such a catastrophe did not happen at all, because there was no chance that it could with such vigilant guardians near at hand.

Ned had, meanwhile, sung out something to his other two chums. This was in the nature of the "I've got it!" of the fielder, when a high fly comes his way; for he wants to warn his neighbors in due time, so that they may not interfere with his play and make a mess of it all.

When Jimmy heard the sharp report of that rifle so close at hand, his heart felt glad within him; for he guessed who had pulled the trigger, and his faith in Ned's markmanship was very great.

"How's that, Mr. Umpire?" he managed to call, shrilly; and Jack, apparently entering into the spirit of the thing, was heard to bawl lustily back, as though the appeal had been directed to him personally:

"Out at first!"

"Next batter up!" yipped little Amos; which was enough to tell the scouts that the great National game was no mystery to this diminutive cow-puncher, with the face and body of a child, but the head of a grown person.

Then the fun suddenly became fast and furious.

CHAPTER VII.

EVERYBODY BUSY.

"My turn next!" shouted Jack, as a further rushing sound announced the arrival of a second detachment of the escaped wolfish horde.

Ned had his shooting eye at its best when he sent the first leaden pellet toward that leading sprinter. The beast had come with a furious rush, and chanced to pass through a succession of shadowy patches, so that the scout master could not pull the trigger as quickly as he might have wished. The wolf had actually made one wild leap upward after Jimmy's retreating and plump form before the crash of the gun came.

It happened that Jimmy was looking back over his shoulder at the time, though he knew that must be a foolish thing to do, and cost many a fleeing hunter dear. He would not soon forget the picture that met his eyes, as that gaunt gray pirate of the herd came rising toward him with that splendid bound.

"Why," Jimmy was heard to say afterwards, when the shock of battle was a thing only of memory, "both his lamps looked like yellow fires, and that red tongue hung from his mouth,

while I could see his long white fangs bared to beat the band. Then I heard the bang of Ned's gun, and that wolf fell back in a heap. When I saw the way he lay crunched up at the foot of my tree, I knew he'd gone and croaked. Gee whiz! but that was a pretty close shave for Jimmy McGraw, let me tell you!"

Jack got his turn and he found it no easy task to knock over a leaping wolf, as glimpsed in the deceptive light. The moon's rays dazzled his eyes, and when he saw the newcomer flashing through the bars of light and shade Jack pulled the trigger with no assurance that he had held positively on his target.

It was true that the beast took a header, which proved that he must have been hit by the bullet; but, even as Jack's nervous hands started to pump another cartridge from the magazine into the firing chamber of his rifle, he saw his intended victim scramble to its feet, utter one long howl, and then start to slink away.

"No you don't there; just hold on a bit!" cried Jack.

In his excitement, he fumbled more than he should with the mechanism of his gun, and thus lost a couple of precious seconds. Indeed, the wounded wolf might have vanished from view amidst the brush, only that Harry took it upon himself to "put his oar in," with the result that the bombarded beast crumpled up.

By that time even Jimmy was ready for business, having managed to snatch up his Marlin, and then look eagerly around for some target at which to fire.

"Don't forget the directions!"

That was Ned calling out. He knew the value of economizing ammunition when far from a base of supply; and, consequently, did not want the others to needlessly do anything of this sort. One bit of lead ought to be enough for each beast, if properly delivered.

This warning was really meant more for Jimmy than either of the others; for he had been known to get tremendously excited on other occasions, when peril threatened, and mix things up considerably.

As everybody had had a shot but Jimmy, it was now his turn, according to the order of events which had been arranged. Jack recognized this fact by advising him to "be prepared" as a true scout always should.

"Here they come with a whoop!" Amos was heard to exclaim, as there came a louder rush through the brushwood than at any previous time, proving that quite a bunch of the hungry animals must be at hand.

"Steady, Jimmy, and be quick to pick your game!" called Ned, thinking to thus keep the other from getting "rattled."

From the furious way in which the balance of

the pack was coming on, it seemed evident that they did not realize what sort of a surprise awaited them near the river bank. Hunger and a keen scent was doing the business for them. They appeared to know that there was something worth while in the eating line around that particular part of the country, and evidently meant to make a bold bid for the same, regardless of consequences.

Jimmy was straining his eyes to discover the first sign of the oncoming pack. He had his faithful repeater up against his shoulder and was aiming at the spot he believed would speedily be occupied by a leaping wolf.

Jimmy was no sharpshooter, though he had done some fairly creditable work along the line of knocking over game in times past. As a rule, he preferred shooting at random into a bunch of quail and taking chances of making a fine bag. So now he indulged in the hope that several of the wolves would break cover in a heap, when he could just blaze away and, perhaps, knock over a couple with one shot; which he fancied would put a feather in his hat as a marksman who knew how to conserve his ammunition.

Then the time came to fire. He could see a confused mass tearing along through the spaces where those bars of light and shadow rather dazzled the eye; and, not daring to wait any longer, Jimmy let fly.

"Hurroo! did you see that beggar roll over? And listen to the other howl, like he had the toothache, and no dentist within twenty miles! Tell me about that, will you? Soak it to 'em, fellers, good and plenty!"

Of course, all this was pretty much lost, because, what with the racket created by howling, yelping and yapping wolves, and the banging of the guns in the hands of the scouts, a din had started that made it impossible to hear any single human voice.

Jimmy realized that if he wanted to have a further share in the disposal of the savage pack, he had better be getting busy again. So he up with his rifle, and looked eagerly for some target at which he could fire.

There never could be a more exciting affair than that battle with the escaped wolves that Harkness, the herder, had been feeding and keeping for breeding purposes. They were far from tamed by their recent confinement; indeed, Ned could not remember ever having run across a more savage pack in all his experience.

Afterwards, in commenting on this strange fact, he came to the conclusion that it was caused by a combination of two things: the animals had not been fed recently, and were almost crazy for food; and then, he learned that Harkness had ever been a cruel despot, using a black-snake whip with a long cutting lash to quiet his pack in

their enclosure, whenever their howling annoyed him—always keeping well out of the reach of their fangs when plying the whip, it may be understood; for he had a species of "pulpit" built out far above the pen, in which he was free to swing that instrument of keen torture.

It was just slaughter, for the wretched wolves really had no chance at all to retaliate. Ned sickened of the business quickly, but what could they do otherwise? It was a condition that had been forced upon them. They had not invited the attack, and must defend themselves against the pack, no matter at what cost.

Before long there were dead and dying wolves lying all around, as "thick as blackberries in the good old summertime," as Jimmy put it. Others that had received wounds, and no longer felt the same furious desire to try conclusions with the enemies perched beyond their reach in the trees, began to slink away. Doubtless, they remembered old lairs in the distant hills to which they might fly; and, in some fashion, supply themselves with the necessary food, without taking such desperate chances.

"All gone, it looks like, Ned!" sang out Jack, "and just when I've gone and got the magazine of my gun charged again, too."

"Set 'em up in the other alley!" cried Jimmy. "I accounted for some of the victims, you can roll your hoop on that!"

"My stars! but that *was* a warm session!" exclaimed Harry; "and I wonder now if you got any sort of picture, Jack, when you used your flashlight on the scrimmage?"

That was just what Jack had done, laid his rifle aside for a minute, and made a good use of his camera, prepared for the occasion. The sudden flare of the cartridge had illuminated the scene as might a flash of lightning; and, possibly, this had been one of the causes that frightened the balance of the pack away, for the attack weakened from that moment.

"Dast we get down now?" asked Jimmy.

While he was speaking, Amos Adams dropped from his perch, as though he could see no further reason for playing the part of a bird and perching there among the branches.

During the racket Ned had several times heard the lighter report of a six-shooter, and understood that the kid cow-puncher was trying to do his share of the work in diminishing the number of Harkness' pets. Whether success followed his efforts or not, Ned was unable to say, though he imagined the boy knew how to shoot the gun he "toted" in the holster at his belt.

As there was no reappearance of the wolves, the rest of the campers came down. The burros and the calico pony had acted as though frantic during the melee; but, as the boys had made

sure to secure them properly, they were all there and by degrees quieting down, when they found that they were not going to be made a meal of by those savage beasts of prey.

The scouts counted just thirteen dead wolves scattered about. Two others were trying to crawl away, dragging their broken limbs after them.

"We must knock those fellows on the head," said Ned; "because they'll die anyway, and it's the duty of a scout to put an end to needless pain."

Although he had already had more than enough of the slaughter, Ned followed after the two escaping animals. They showed their venomous natures by turning on him and snarling furiously; but Ned stopped far enough away not to endanger himself from those glistening fangs exposed when the red lips were drawn back.

Two quick shots did the business, and then there were fiteen.

"Huh! Harkness' game is about up this time, and he won't raise any more young wolves to sell the skins for lap-robes and turn over the scalps to the State for bounty money," Jack observed, as they all gathered again near the fire, which was started up afresh; for they could not think of such a thing as sleep for some little time, after so much excitement.

"If there's even two dollars apiece, it would

net a feller thirty plunks right now, to raise the hair of this bunch," speculated Jimmy.

"But we don't want to go into the wolf scalping business, do we, Ned?" expostulated Harry, who viewed the idea with considerable disgust.

"Certainly not," replied the scout master. "Let Harkness come and get his property if he wants, for all of us. We've saved him all the trouble of cleaning up his pack. He ought to thank us for it; but, if what Amos here says about him is true, I don't believe he will."

"Well," said Jack, frowning, "he'd better not get too gay and try to blame us for cleaning out the pack, because we won't stand any abuse. It was a case of give and take. They meant to pull us down and make a fine meal; and they got what was coming to them. Harkness had better go slow how he complains."

"I was wondering," mused Ned, as he settled down comfortably again, just as though nothing worth mentioning had happened to disturb him, "whether anything had come to Harkness?"

"How could there?" demanded Jimmy.

"Oh! of course, I don't know, but then it might be the wolves had caught him off his guard and torn him to pieces before they skipped out. If we have time, perhaps we ought to go around that way and see if there's anything wrong."

The others did not seem to look at it in the same light that Ned was doing.

"A waste of time, Ned," Jack declared, vehemently.

"That's what I say," added Harry.

"Can't see what it matters to us whether the old rascal has been hoisted by his own infernal machine or not!" grumbled Jimmy.

"But don't forget that we're scouts," Ned continued impressively, "and that we ought to follow the scout law which teaches us to do good, even to our enemies, if the chance opens up."

"After we've licked the same good and plenty, I admit," Jimmy spoke up, with one of his famous grins decorating his freckled face and a twinkle in his eye. "P'raps you're right, Ned; and, as we've upset the old man's business, we could call that a lickin' and let her go at that. If you're of the same mind in the mornin', tell me. But say, I b'lieve I could snatch a few winks right now, since things have calmed down."

Save for the distant mournful howling of several of the hungry wolves nothing was to be heard all around them. So after arranging for keeping "watch and watch," the scouts turned in. Amos snuggled down alongside them; while Jack, upon whom had fallen the choice for the first spell at playing sentry, settled his back up against a tree, laid his ready gun across his knees, and prepared to do his duty.

The fire burned brightly for a long time and

Jack sat there thinking of many things connected with both the past and the immediate future. Doubtless, he felt that it began to look as though they were not yet through with hazards and adventures on this trip, when, on what was practically their first night out on the open plain, they had been so savagely beset by Harkness' escaped wolf pack.

By degrees even the distant howling of the few survivors died away, as they no doubt started for the distant mountains, afraid to come back to the scene of the recent carnage, even though the scent of blood must have tempted them dreadfully.

Jimmy had gone to sleep immediately he lay down, for he never knew the time when he could not forget his troubles in sweet slumber. Once or twice he managed to get on his back and aroused Ned by his heavy breathing. On these occasions the scout master was in the habit of giving the offender a sharp punch in the ribs and it seemed as though Jimmy understood what was wanted, even in his sleep, for he would inevitably turn over on his side.

Ned had just been through the third experience of this kind and was wondering whether he had not better suggest that they always tie Jimmy in a certain position as he lay down to sleep, when he heard a voice close by.

As Ned instantly sat up he recognized the tones as belonging to Pard Jack, who was evidently laying down the law to some party:

"Hold up your hands, you there in the bushes, and step right up to the fire, or I'll shoot; and, let me tell you, this gun goes straight! Lively now, Mister, and no foolishness! Oh! Ned! come here, will you? We've got a visitor!"

CHAPTER VIII.

AN UNWELCOME GUEST.

When Ned started toward the spot where he knew Jack was on guard, he could hear Harry groping for his rifle, and this told him the other would also be close on his heels. Harry, finding that Jimmy still slumbered peacefully, managed to give him a severe poke in the ribs as he passed that had an immediate effect.

"Here, who's doin' that now?" broke from Jimmy's lips, and then, no doubt, he suddenly realized that there was something up, for he saw Ned poking the fire, holding his gun in the other hand, and Harry also standing erect, armed in the same manner.

Accordingly, Jimmy made haste to discover his gun and follow after them. In the meantime, the dusky figure among the bushes which Jack was covering had stood erect and started to advance toward the fire, as ordered, holding his hands high above his head.

"It's Harkness!" cried out the kid puncher, who had been on his feet about as soon as Ned; and, somehow, no one was much surprised at the information thus conveyed.

Ned saw that Harkness was just about such a looking man as one might picture if asked to describe a wolf-raiser. He had grayish hair and a scraggy beard; his face was ugly, and his eyes, like those of a rat for keenness and audacity. Taken in all, he was as tough looking a character as the scouts had run across in many a day.

"Wot d'ye mean a holdin' a man up thisaway, when he jest natrally draps in to arsk who killed them pets o' his'n?" the wolf-herder blurted out, though careful not to take his hands down, for he knew that Jack was still covering him with that dangerous looking repeating rifle, and there was an air of business about the weapon that warned him not to get careless.

"Oh! you can lower your hands now, if you want," Jack sang out, "because we're all on deck and could riddle your hide with lead if you tried to use your gun. So just take things easy now, Mr. Harkness, if that's your name."

"It air!" growled the man, staring hard at each boy in turn, as though he did not know what to make of their khaki uniforms and was a little afraid he had run up against a detachment of United States regulars.

"And I reckon then that all these dead wolves belonged to you?" Ned went on to remark, as he swept his hand around.

The man said something hard under his breath.

"Ye gone an' busted up my bizness, thet's wot ye done, w'en ye laid out tuh kill the animiles!" he complained, as he gritted his yellow teeth very much as one of the wounded wolves had done at Ned's approach.

"That couldn't be helped, Harkness," the scout master told him. "Your wolves had broken out, and you couldn't expect to ever trap many of them again, at the best. They came at us like fury, and we had to defend ourselves, or we'd have been torn to pieces like a flash. And that's why this happened. We weren't out hunting for trouble; but you've lost you pack on account of a weak place in your pen."

"But ain't yuh meanin' tuh pay me anything fo' shootin' up my pets thisaways?" Harkness demanded, trying to look fierce, though keeping an eye on Jack with his ready gun.

Jimmy laughed out very loud.

"Would you be after hearing the nerve of him, fellers?" he exclaimed in derision. 'Tis meself that thinks it sounds like adding insult to injury. After lettin' the pack loose to make a square meal from us, then askin' pay, because we had to fight to save our precious lives. 'Tis a rare joke, it is—not on your tintype, Mister Harkness. Our principle is 'millions for defense, not a plunk for tribute.' So put that in your pipe and smoke it."

"You've got a lot of assurance, Harkness," Ned told him, severely, "to think of asking such a thing. Why, the boot is on the other foot, and we ought to be demanding that you pay us back for all the ammunition it took to clean up your pack for you. I'm half inclined to believe we could prosecute you for keeping such a lot of savage animals. You'd be wise to go mighty slow about trying to make trouble for any of us. We might take a notion to run you in."

The man's whole demeanor changed when he discovered that his bluster was not going to alarm the scouts.

"I hopes now," he went on to say in a whining tone, "thet yuh won't keep me from taking the pelts off my poor pets. They's worth sumpin' tuh me, likewise the scalps o' the same. I been bankin' on thet money this long time. Hit's all I got tuh see me through the winter. Don't be too hard on me, gents. I'm out o' the wolf raisin' line fo' keeps, arter this bust-up."

Ned consulted with his chums for a minute or two and then turned again to the intruder.

"Here's what we propose to have you do, Harkness," he remarked, with such an air of finality that the man knew he must yield to circumstances, "hand over that gun of yours to me; you'll get it again in the morning, when we break camp. Then lie down and go to sleep. One of us will be on the watch all the time, so if you

try any monkey-doodle business, as Jimmy here would call it, better go slow, or something will happen. Do you understand that, Harkness?"

The man's ugly face grew as black as a thunder cloud, and then with an effort he tried to grin, though it only added to his unsavory appearance.

"Thar be times w'en a feller has tuh eat crow an' I reckons as how this be sech a time fo' me, younker," he said, slowly. "Oh! I hain't no 'jections tuh stayin' hyar alongside the fire; but I hopes as how yuh'll let me hev my pelts w'en mo'nin' comes 'long."

"Yes, we'll agree to that and, if you behave, you can take your propety after we clear out in the morning. Perhaps we'll go so far as to invite you to breakfast, too, in the bargain, Harkness, to show that we have no bad feelings because your pack made us have a pretty hot session to-night. So that's settled. Your gun, please."

The wolf-herder handed it over, though with an ill grace. No doubt, he was what they call a "bad man" down in the Southwest, and this thing of being made a prisoner by a parcel of half-grown boys, as it seemed, galled him greatly.

After that he dropped down near the fire, clasped both arms about his knees and stared moodily into the flames.

"Jack, seems to me you've outstayed the time limit we set," Ned suggested, after taking a

quick look up to where the moon was sailing through a star-decked sky; for scouts early learn to tell time from the positions of heavenly bodies, and the setting of a star will be almost as sure an indication that a certain hour has arrived as though a watch had been consulted.

"Oh! well, I thought you seemed to be sleeping so sound that I'd let it run on a little," the other made answer, for Jack was as generous as they make boys, "and then, you see, I got interested watching *him* come creeping along like a snake, stopping every minute to examine one of the dead wolves, and saying something to himself each time, like he kept getting madder and madder."

"Well, I'm going on duty now, Jack, so just crawl over to your blanket and turn in," said Ned, in his quiet but positive way.

Amos was hovering near him at the time, as though he wanted to say a few words on the sly. He found the chance when Ned sat down, also leaning against the same tree that had supported the other vidette.

"I wouldn't think too much about hurtin' the feelings of that old mule-skinner if I was you, Ned," the kid cow-puncher went on to say, "he ain't near so mad as he puts on. Why, if it hadn't been for you and the rest, he'd never got a single pelt of all that pack. They were free and would a got clear away, if we hadn't rounded the same

up here. Fifteen hides, and as many scalps, he gets, without wasting his ammunition. He's putting on—that's what. But keep an eye out for him, Ned. That was a smart trick to take his gun away; but you've only scotched the snake, not killed it."

Ned promised that he would watch the wolf-herder closely and not allow him to make any sort of suspicious move.

"I don't think he means to try any funny business, though," he added. "You see he stands to lose all his pelts if he pulls his freight and gives us the goodbye sign. And with five against him, the odds are too big; for a boy with a rifle can be just as dangerous as a full-grown man."

It was somewhere near one o'clock at the time of the alarm. The moon was high up in the heavens and even starting down her road toward the western horizon.

Ned kept watch and ward diligently. He did not mean to be caught napping by any unsuspected circumstance. It was hardly likely that Harkness could have any allies near by. Ned had been particular in asking about that, and Amos assured him that so far as he knew, the wolf-herder conducted his business alone, shunning the society of others, save on rare occasions when he came to town for a spree.

The night passed away without anything else

happening to disturb the sleep of Jimmy. Harry awoke later on and insisted on taking his turn at keeping watch; so Ned secured his blanket and lay down close to him, having impressed it on Harry's mind that, at the least sign of a movement on the part of Harkness, he was to reach out a hand and shake him.

But just as Ned had said, the wolf man must have figured it out that he had everything to gain and nothing to lose by staying where he was and waiting for the boys to break camp. when his gun would be returned and himself left at liberty to rid those dead animals of their shaggy gray coats.

Jimmy was thoughful to cook enough breakfast for an extra mouth, and so Harkness was given his full share of coffee, bacon, and fried potatoes, as well as all the crackers he could eat.

He said little or nothing, unless some question happened to be fired his way, when he would make a curt answer. All the while he kept his ears open and eyed the boys in a suspicious way, as though disturbed by their presence in the neighborhood. Those suits of khaki evidently puzzled Harkness, who could never have run across Boy Scouts before and knew nothing about their ways.

Noticing these looks on his part, and how he appeared to be listening intently, as though desirous of picking up certain information that

might prove of value to him later on, Ned cautioned his chums against speaking of their affairs. This he managed to do, through certain gestures and nods, when the man's eyes happend to be turned in another direction.

Later on they made ready to pull up stakes and once more start on their journey toward the cattle ranch, which they expected to reach before sunset on this same day.

Harkness was eagerly waiting to be handed his gun, which Ned had taken the trouble to unload while it was in his possession. There was not much chance that the man woud dare fire upon them, since he knew what the result would be and how apt to prove unpleasant for a fellow of his size; but, then, Ned believed in taking all precautions possible, and he certainly did not like the looks of that heavy face with its rat-like eyes, which Jimmy compared with the glittering orbs of a pet ferrit he had at home.

He had already been busily engaged removing the hides of the slain wolves and seemed to be willing to accept what the fates had given him. All the same, Ned believed he was a treacherous character who would betray his best friend for a money consideration, and he did not mean to trust him too far.

When everything had been packed and they were ready to depart, Ned laid the rusty gun of the wolf-herder on the ground.

"There's your property, Harkness," he remarked casually, "just as I promised. And I want to say in parting company with you, that I think you're lucky to get about half your pelts, after losing the whole outfit. Of course, we don't expect you to thank us for saving half a loaf; but we'll be looking back as we leave here to see how you get on. And, Harkness, I wouldn't be in any too big a hurry to step over to where I laid your gun. So-long!"

The man said never a word in reply but if looks could kill, surely Ned must have met his finish then and there, to judge from the black scowl that settled on the heavy face of the wolf man.

In this fashion, then, they started out on what they hoped would be their last day's journey before arriving at the ranch of Harry's uncle. All of the scouts seemed to be feeling particularly merry on this bright morning. Perhaps it was because of the clever way in which they had escaped from the many perils that had lain in wait to ambush them since leaving the Coast.

"We're well out of gunshot distance by now," observed Jack, "and he's still working with his pelts, so it doesn't seem as though we'd have any trouble with that Harkness. Of all the tough looking characters I've ever run across, he sure takes the cake. I don't believe there could be anything worse made."

At that Amos was heard to chuckle.

"Oh! you think so, do you, Jack?" he remarked with lofty scorn, "just wait till you glimpse my awful dad, and then you can talk. He's a holy terror! Why, even the yellow curs in the town streets take to running with their tails between their hind legs when they see him coming along. His looks and his fog-horn voice have carried him through many a tight place; but there's one hole he always sticks in. My dad is as good as a whole regiment, to make men shake in their boots; but—" and again did the kid puncher pause in that strange way, while a mysterious smile crept over his dark face, as though certain recollections gave him more or less amusement.

Ned's curiosity had been aroused to a mild extent, but he would not ask questions, preferring to wait for time to unravel the mystery connected with these vague hints on the part of Amos Adams.

A short time later and they had lost all track of the previous night's camp in the hazy distance. And from that time forward, the scouts were interested only in what lay ahead; for somewhere far off they knew was to be found the cattle ranch to which they were bound and where a warm welcome, undoubtedly, awaited them, after their perilous hike across burning deserts, towering mountain ridges, and the valley with the evil name.

CHAPTER IX.

THE HOMING PIGEON.

"What are we turning aside for, Ned?" and as Jimmy asked this question he laid a hand on the arm of the scout master, having pushed up from behind, leading the pack animal that had been given over to his charge after his own was lost.

"Why," replied Ned, readily enough, "you see, Amos lives over among those trees, where there's a little stream, and he hinted pretty broadly that, while we were passing, he'd like us to meet up with his mother."

"Oh! that's all right," Jimmy asserted. "I've taken quite a liking for the kid and a little rest will do the bunch good, anyway. One thing I've made up my mind about, Ned, and I don't care who hears me say it."

"All right, pitch in, and let's get the glad news, Jimmy," remarked Jack, from a point near by.

"Never again for me to start our on a trip afoot while I'm here in this hot country!" Jimmy declared solemnly, holding up his hand, as though he were in the witness box. "What

sillies we were not to have thought of that instead of putting our good cash into that bunco automobile that played out before it even got decently started."

"It seems that we've all learned our little lesson," Ned admitted, "and after this we ride, if we go at all. Cars may do very well, where there are half-way decent roads; but out on the sandy desert and on the plains give me a broncho every time.

"But say, are you fellows noticing how jolly this scenery is around here?" Harry wanted to know just then, from the rear. "Look at that sage brush on the slope of that low hill over to the right. It must be breast high to a horse, and seems like I could smell its fragrance away off here. How gray it looks, except where the wind waves it and then it seems nearly purple."

"Yes," added Ned, "and this must be what they call rattlesnake weed, though I don't know what it's got to do with the crawlers. You can see the grasshoppers jumping in that lush stuff where the ground's moist. And there's a king bird sitting on that high weed yonder."

"Listen to the gophers whistling a warning to their kind, when they see us coming," remarked Jack. "Yes, Harry, you're right, this is worth looking at. Why, I wouldn't be surprised now, if at night-time, you could hear the drowsy chirp of the crickets and the shrill rattle of katydids

around here. A bigger contrast to what we went through in that desert you couldn't imagine."

"It's sure all to the good," asserted Jimmy, "and I don't blame that mother of Amos for pitching her dugout in this particular region. But mebbe she'll be sorry the boy didn't fetch any game home with him."

"Oh! Amos says he means to start out again in a different direction and knows where he's pretty sure to get an antelope, anyhow," Jack remarked.

They were now approaching the trees in which some sort of human habitation evidently had been constructed, for smoke was seen curling lazily upward.

It proved to be one of those half-dugout, half-building which is to be found in many parts of the Wild West where lumber is scarce. As there was practically no winter weather in this part of the country, it answered all purposes, though far from a thing of beauty.

Still, that mother of Amos' had brightened things up more or less, so that it could be seen the hand of a woman was around. A small garden lay back of the house, surrounded by a wire fence to keep animals from devouring the precious green stuff which was grown there.

Several dogs started toward them with yelps and deep-throated barking; and Jimmy unconsciously reached out a hand for the Marlin that

was fastened to the pack of his burro. Jimmy's dislike for wolves was shared by dogs of all kinds. He said it must have been born in him, since he could not remember ever having had any desperate adventure with canine foes while a kid.

Amos, however, threw oil on the troubled waters and, at the sound of his voice, the fury of the dogs changed instantly to a noisy greeting. They jumped up and fawned on the kid in a way that told how much they loved him. And, doubtless, instinct told each beast that those in company of the young master must also be friends; for, when Ned whistled and snapped his fingers, one of the dogs immediately started to approach, wagging his tail in a neighborly way.

A small-sized woman had come out of the dugout and stood there with a hand shading her eyes, as though to see who might be approaching. Ned noticed that she carried a shotgun in her other hand, and it struck him that a woman who might often be left at home alone in this strange country had need of knowing how to use some sort of firearm.

She looked very meek and did not seem to have very much snap and go about her. When Amos introduced the boys and told what a great favor they had done him, she went around shaking hands in an odd way; but evidently Mrs. Adams differed from the vast majority of her sex, for she did not seem to have much to say.

"Gee! what a shame!" Jimmy muttered in Ned's ear.

"What is?" asked the scout master, also in a whisper.

"That's always the way it goes," continued the observing Jimmy, "seems like there never was a shrinking little woman, as timid as they make 'em, but what she had to go and link herself with some big bully of a blustering man. Opposites seem to attract in this world; you've seen a speck of a girl pick out the tallest feller she could find, and the other way ,too."

"Yes, it does look like that, Jimmy," admitted Ned, as he tried to discover some trace of spunk about the little woman, and utterly failed.

"Chances are," Jimmy continued, in his reflective way, "that when this bad man of a Hy Adams, the worst case along the whole border, they say, gets on one of his tearin' fits, he just makes Rome howl. And say, I can just see that poor timid little thing cowering down like a scared puppy when it hears its master raging. But, then, mebbe Amos he hangs around to sort of protect his maw; though it don't seem as if a small chap like him could do much along that line."

"If he does, he didn't think it right to do any boasting that I can remember," Ned replied, again studying the mistress of the dugout, but without much success.

Mrs. Adams insisted on their resting a short while and taking a cup of coffee with her. Apparently, she had some means of her own, for there seemed to be plenty to do with in the place; and when the boys saw the bunks used for sleeping they pronounced them not at all bad. Indeed Jimmy promptly began yawning; and, if any one had invited him to test one of the bunks, the chances are he would have only too willingly complied.

There was little said during the meal, at least by the mother of Amos. Perhaps, as Jimmy suggested in an aside to Ned, the weight of her troubles in being mated to a human hurricane like Hy Adams had taken all the life out of her, and hence she evinced but little interest in whatever happened.

Amos, as if to cover up this lack of conversational gifts on the part of his mother, kept the boys busy telling some of their past adventures. And, finally, Ned advised that they had better be getting ready to pull out, as considerable territory remained to be covered before they could expect to reach the cattle ranch buildings.

"You'll sure look us up before long, Amos?" he said to the lad, as they shook hands at parting.

"I should say yes," added impulsive Jimmy; "because I'd hate to think I wasn't goin' to see you again."

Amos looked serious.

"I did promise you, didn't I?" he observed slowly, "and when I says a thing I nigh always keep my word; but I kinder reckon as how I mightn't be welcome over to the Double Cross Ranch."

"You mean, because you have the hard luck to be connected with a bad man like Hy Adams?" Harry remarked. "But don't bother about a little thing like that. My two uncles are the kind of men who judge a fellow by what he's done himself, and not by his relations. Why, we had a bad egg in our family once, and seems to me he was hung or something of the kind. But that's no reason I ought to be, is it?"

"Er, I don't know about that," muttered Jimmy, with a sparkle in his fun-loving blue eyes.

The goodbyes were said, and the scouts started again toward the southeast. Amos had given them full directions, so that there was no possibility of their going wrong. And as the day was far cooler than many they had experienced of late, all of them were feeling in fine spirits.

They watched the buzzards lazily wheeling around high up in the heavens, apparently bent on finding out where they could get their next meal.

"What a fine view they must have of the plain up there," Harry happened to remark; "makes me think of when we went up with those aviators, who had the dirigible balloon near the border of Death Valley and were experimenting in drop-

ping bombs down, just like will be done in the next big war between the Nations, when battleships must give way to aeroplanes and submarines."

"Watch that hawk, will you!" cried Jack, "see how he is chasing after that bird! I declare, it looks like he'd sure get his dinner."

"How I hate hawks!" exclaimed Jimmy, hotly, as he reached for his gun, "they're the pirates of the air, and just duck down on poor little birds whenever they feel like having a bite. Hey! he got the innocent that rush, didn't he? Oh! wouldn't I just like to get a shot at the murderer, though!"

Jimmy, of course, forgot this was the daily business of the hawk and that he only slew when he was hungry and not for pleasure. He also forgot that many men who call themselves *sportsmen* persist in killing game or game fish long after they have reached the limit of disposing of the same for food and even throw the victims of their cruelty aside in heaps—the more shame to their claim to manhood.

"Well, perhaps you may have a chance to play the noble role of avenger," chuckled Jack, "that is, if you can shoot straight; because you notice the hawk has now flown with his prey to that dead treetop and alighted there. Jimmy, get your gun and show us what you can do."

"Just what I will," replied the other promptly.

It was a pretty long shot for Jimmy. He seemed to doubt his ability to do the needful, without having some sort of rest for his gun.

"Jack, will you do me a favor?" he asked.

"Sure I will, Jimmy; just name it," was the reply.

"Be my gun rest, won't you now; because I'd like to do for that pirate the worst kind, but 'tis thinkin' I am that it's a bit too far for me. What I've gone through lately has made me hand a little unsteady, like."

Jack was accommodating enough to back up in front of the intended sharpshooter and arrange himself in such fashion that Jimmy could rest his rifle on one of his shoulders.

"There you are," he remarked, placing fingers in both ears, so that the report might not deafen him. "I'll hold as steady as Gibraltar Rock, Jimmy, so if you miss you mustn't go and lay the blame on me, hear?"

"Easy now, and I'm off!" muttered the other, as he took aim.

The sharp report sounded a couple of seconds later.

"Bully for you, Jimmy!" shouted Jack, immediately.

"Did I get him?" cried the delighted marksman.

"Did you!" echoed Harry, "look at him circling down to the ground right now! You

knocked him galley-west, I should say, if I was on a boat now. Go and get your game, Jimmy, and let's see the old buccaneer."

"Bring in the dinner he caught, too," remarked Ned, "I'm curious to see what it is; because it didn't look like any wild bird around here."

"And be careful how you handle the hawk, if he's only winged," warned Jack, "for they can fight like all get-out, and the first thing he'll try to get at will be your eyes. Knock him on the head, Jimmy, before you handle him."

"Shucks! tell me somethin' I don't know!" laughed the other, starting off, gun in hand, toward the trees growing along the same stream that passed the door of Hy Adams' dugout, some three miles away.

He came back after a little while carrying a dead hawk.

"It was a fine shot, for a fact!" admitted Jack, as he took the bird into his hands, the better to see where the bullet had struck.

"What's that you've got besides, Jimmy?" asked Harry.

"Me to the foolish house if it don't make me think of a pet pigeon I used to have long ago," Jimmy ventured.

"It *is* a pigeon," said Ned, as he handled the dead bird that had been chased and captured by the hungry hawk.

"What's that, Ned; a tame pigeon out here on the plains?" Jack questioned.

"Well, there are no wild pigeons any more, all gone," Ned explained, "and this bird is a passenger pigeon or a carrier. You can see from the odd shape of its bill."

"What they call a homing pigeon, you mean, don't you, Ned?" asked Harry.

"Just that," was the reply, "and here, as sure as you live, there's a message tied with a thread to his leg, right now. Why, somebody must have been experimenting sending a message back home by this air post."

"Blast that old hawk, he spoiled the whole game!" muttered Jimmy, wrathfully.

"But stop and think, Jimmy," Harry told him, "if it hadn't been for the hawk you shot, we wouldn't have known about this thing at all. But there's Ned opening the little piece of tissue paper on which the message is written. Tell us about it, Ned, won't you?"

The scout master was staring at the thin piece of paper he had smoothed out, as though it contained certain information that interested him deeply.

And as the other three scouts gathered around him, eagerly waiting until he took them more fully into his confidence, they seemed to feel as though the very air was charged with a fresh supply of mystery.

CHAPTER X.

AT DOUBLE CROSS RANCH.

The first words spoken by Ned added to the puzzle, for he turned to his chums and propounded a question.

"Did any of you happen to notice which way the pigeon was flying, before the hawk darted out from the trees and chased it?"

"Yes," Jack informed him promptly, "I saw the bird coming away in the distance, and it was flying as straight as an arrow, when the hawk shot up out of the screen of the trees and made it swerve to try and escape; but it wasn't quick enough."

"Which way was it coming then?" asked Ned.

Jack pointed toward the southeast.

"Right yonder and in the same direction we're heading," he replied.

Ned frowned and looked even more serious.

"Then it begins to look as though this messenger pigeon might have been freed from somewhere about your uncles' ranch, Harry, and was making for its coop when the hawk killed it. You know they've been known to fly hundreds and hundreds of miles, even from New York to

Pittsburgh, and arrive safe, tired, and half-starved after a couple of days."

"It always did beat my time how they did it," said Jack, "though what you say is true, every word of it, Ned. But what is there so stunning about the fact of this bird having been set loose at the ranch? Some puncher may be a homing pigeon fancier and sends a bird to his home, many miles away, once in so often. It would be a great little stunt, I should think."

"Yes, ditto here," added Harry, "so tell us why you think it's queer, Ned."

"On account of the message," replied the scout master.

"Well, we don't know what that is, so read it out!" urged Jack.

"All right, I will," Ned told them, and then glancing down once more at the thin piece of paper he held he continued: "'Some talk of both bosses going to W. soon. Be ready to act. Will let you know in time! Chances good for big sweep! We count five!'"

"Glory hallelujah! what's all that patter mean?" gasped Jimmy, who seemed unable to make head or tail out of the communication.

Jack and Harry, however, realized that Ned was about right when he said it looked as though there might be more in the message than appeared on the bare face.

"You notice that it says *two* bosses, don't you?" asked Ned.

"Yes, and that must refer to my two uncles, Colonel Job Haines and James Henshaw?" Harry suggested.

"What does the W mean?" asked Jack.

"I think that must be a town on the railroad, where they ship the cattle in season," replied Ned.

"'Be ready to act,' it goes on to say," Jack continued, "which would make it appear as though the writer knew there was some sort of a raid contemplated."

"A raid!" echoed Jimmy, "faith, d'ye mean by rustlers?"

"That's the only kind of raid cattlemen fear nowadays, since the wild animals have been well cleaned out and the reds stick to their reservations pretty much all the time," Harry informed him, "but just to think of what this would stand for, if it's true."

"A traitor or traitors employed at the Double Cross Ranch," the scout master declared. "Well that wouldn't be the first time such a thing had happened. In fact, these cattle rustlers usually have means for learning all that is going on with the punchers. In that way, they manage to time their raids when most of the hands are away. Seems that there might be quite a bunch of the hounds, because he mentions the fact that the party he's sending the message to can count on five to muss things up at the time the raid is engineered."

Harry laughed grimly.

"Perhaps, now, my Uncle Job won't be tickled half to death to get hold of this telltale message!" he gurgled. "If only he can find who wrote the same, it'll turn out to be his Waterloo, believe me, if half I've heard about Uncle Job is true."

"And that ought to be easy," remarked Jack.

"You mean, he could tell from the handwriting?" Harry demanded.

"Yes, but there would be a better way than that," the other scout continued, as he gave Ned a knowing nod.

" 'Tis the pigeon, you must mean!" exclaimed Jimmy.

"That's it," Jack acknowledged, "and surely a fellow couldn't keep birds like that and set one flying every once in so often, without others knowing about it. Find the puncher who's got the homing pigeon fancy and you'll have the leader of the spies at the Double Cross, if that's where the bird started from."

The scout master nodded his head approvingly.

"That was well figured out, Jack," he said, "and did your scout logic credit. A scout has got to keep his wits sharpened and not let anything slip past him, no matter how small it may seem. Of course, the owner of the pigeon must be guilty; and, just as you say, it wouldn't be

easy for him to carry on with his birds unless most of the other punchers knew about it."

"But the message?" Jimmy objected.

"Oh! they didn't see this one, but another that the fellow would be smart enough to get up, and *pretend* to fasten to the leg of the air traveler," Jack went on to say, in a way that showed how his mind had grasped the subject.

Ned carefully folded the tissue paper and put it safely away in his pocketbook.

"That was the luckiest shot you ever made, I take it, Jimmy," he remarked, turning to the freckled-faced chum, who immediately puffed his chest out in a ridiculous fashion and began to pretend to take on airs.

"Oh! the rest of you can do some stunts once in a coon's age," he told them, "but when it comes right down to taking the cake, you have to apply to your Uncle Jimmy. I managed to land there with both feet. Luck and me, we're bedfellers, you see. But then, far from me 'twould be to boast. It was a fair shot, Ned, I admit it. And the McGraw luck held good."

"You'll have to let me in on a little of that, Jimmy," Jack told him, "because you happened to be using my shoulder at the time, remember. Only for that, chances are you'd have lost the hawk and we'd never have known that it was a homer he had caught for his lunch.

"Shake on that, Jack; you're in," Jimmy was quick to say.

"But we'd better be going on, hadn't we?" Harry asked. "Because I'm more anxious now than ever to pull up at the ranch house."

"Yes," Ned informed them, "we've got a long walk ahead of us yet. I'll do up the pigeon and the hawk to show your uncle, on the quiet, when there's no one else around. You see, he's apt to think we may be yarning, because it's a queer and fishy story, come to think of it; and the more proof we have the better."

"Takes you to look away ahead," declared Jack; "now, like as not, I'd have tossed both birds away and then wished I hadn't later on. An ounce of prevention is better than a pound of cure, they say. The fellow who can think ahead takes the cake."

"Then I'm goin' to get busy and be that feller," Jimmy assured them, "because I always did like cake."

The forward march was resumed, with the three burros plodding along after their accustomed slow method of travel. They had to be urged frequently, with the tickle of a whip. The only times they showed traces of eagerness were when approaching places where water could be had, and then they almost ran.

As the afternoon wore along, the scouts knew that they were drawing near a cattle ranch.

Many things told them this pleasing news. They found tracks of droves all about them on the grassy plain, and three times had they glimpsed a feeding herd in the swale, where some low hills joined the more level ground.

"I can see houses among the trees ahead there!" announced Ned, after he had had the field glasses up to his eye for a short time.

All of them wanted to take a look, then, and great was the rejoicing when it was found to be true.

"About two miles more of this weary hiking, and then goodbye to it!" Jack gave as his opinion, in which the other joined.

They took a fresh start after that, and it was not long before Jimmy declared he could see a bunch of riders starting out from the trees and heading toward them.

"They've sighted us," asserted Ned, "and, of course, wonder who we can be; because Harry here thought to take his uncles by surprise and didn't tell them when to expect us, except to say, we'd probably drop in on the ranch if down this way."

"You see," Harry went on to explain, "when I wrote last, it was from Los Angeles; and, about that time, I didn't feel so sure we'd ever get through alive."

"First time I knew you felt worried," Ned told him. "All of you seemed so dead set on

carrying out the programme that I couldn't say what I thought."

"You must mean," Jack said, "that it looked silly and foolish to think we could cross the deserts and mountain canyons in that old rantankerous automobile?"

Ned laughed.

"Never mind what I thought," he remarked. "It's too late now to cry over spilt milk. We got through, didn't we? And we've had experiences that will always stay with us. That's enough. And, at last, we can see our goal just ahead."

"Hurrah for the Double Cross Ranch!" exclaimed Jimmy.

The half-dozen cowboys came whirling toward them, shouting, swinging their hats, and riding as only punchers on the plains can.

"Remember, everybody," warned Ned, "not a word about that hawk and pigeon episode."

"We understand what you mean, Ned," Harry replied.

Presently the mad riders came galloping up in a cloud of alkali dust.

"Told you so, boys!" cried a tall rangy fellow, who sat his pony as though he might be a part of the animal—one of those Centaurs of old. "Ketch on to the scout togs, would you? Say, are you Harry Stevens?"

He had unconsciously picked out Ned when

asking this question, because he must have somehow seen that he was the leader; perhaps, it was partly from his looks; and, then again, the fact that Ned had no burro to take care of, while all his companions did, may have had something to do with it.

"No, but I'm his chum, Ned Nestor. That's Harry over yonder, and I reckon now that we're glad to be at the Double Cross."

"But where'd you come from, pard?" demanded the cowboy, who had thrown one leg over his saddle, the better to talk.

"Los Angeles," replied Ned, indifferently.

At that the punchers stared and even exchanged various winks and nods.

"Not with them lazy burros, I opine, pard?" ventured the spokesman.

"Oh! no, we picked these up in the hills, buying them from prospectors, who had had enough and were meaning to go home," Ned informed him.

"That was after our automobile broke down and had to be abandoned, in the middle of the Mojave Desert," Harry volunteered.

The cowpuncher gave a whistle to indicate his surprise. Ned noticed that his manner had changed somewhat, too. Doubtless, because these boys were from the East and somewhat green with regard to ranch ways, he may have imagined, in the beginning, that they were genuine tenderfeet.

He knew better now. Any party of boys who could by themselves cross that terrible Mojave Desert and make their way down to this country bordering the Colorado River, must surely be made of the right stuff.

"Get up behind me, Ned, and ride the rest of the way; proud to have you join us. And we reckons as how we'll give you the time of your life while you're at the old Double Cross Ranch."

Ned promptly accepted this invitation on the part of the lanky puncher, whom he heard called "Chunky," probably because he was just the opposite; while a real fat roly-poly sort of a rider answered, when they addressed him as "Skinny," which made it look as though these boys might have drawn the wrong slips out of the hat at the ranch christening.

Jack, Harry and Jimmy were all similarly accommodated with seats, while two other punchers promised to see that the pack animals got in.

A wild ride they made of those two miles. The scouts clasped their arms around their new friends and held on for dear life; but none of them fell off and presently they found themselves in front of the ranch house.

"Sorry to tell ye, Harry," announced the lanky puncher, "that both your uncles, together with a couple of the boys, has headed for the railroad, to fetch home a bounch of imported

stock they sent for, meaning to improve the breed of our long horns. So ye'll have to wait two days or so before you see 'em; but Aunt Mehitabel, she's inside, and will make you all welcome, sure thing."

With that the four punchers were off again, doubtless to attend to some of the duties they were hired to perform.

The four boys stood there exchanging significant looks, as the sun drew near the distant western horizon.

"Looks some serious, don't it?" remarked Harry.

"Both bosses have gone away just as that message said," Jack observed. "I wonder, now, if these conspirators will try to send another communication to their rustler friends."

"I'm afraid that has already been done," Ned told them, "and we were powerless to stop it. Because just as we rode up, I saw a pigeon flying in by circles high up in the air; then, as if it had gotten its bearings, it went off on a straight line into the northwest. That bird must have carried the news that the time to strike had come."

CHAPTER XI.

THE SHEEP AND THE GOATS.

The scouts were now confronted by conditions calculated to keep them guessing at a lively rate. With both owners of the ranch away, to whom were they to communicate their alarming news? How could they know that in this telling the story, they might not be giving themselves away to one of the suspects?

It was a situation calling for considerable head work and reasoning, so that a serious mistake might not be made in the start.

What made it still more difficult to manage was the fact, which Harry seemed to be aware of, that there was no real foreman on the place; Colonel Job himself filling that position, while James Henshaw took other duties upon his shoulders.

"How about telling your Aunt Mehitabel about it, Harry?" Ned asked, as they exchanged views and seemed to get no nearer a definite arrangement.

"Just what we'll have to do," replied the other chum, "and say, if only she'll agree to let us have a free hand, and tell the boys to do what we

want, p'raps we might find some way yet to upset the game of the rustlers."

"You just bet we will that!" said Jimmy, with all the confidence of one whose lexicon knew no such word as fail.

"The first thing we must do," ventured Ned, seriously, "is to find out who it is sends these treacherous messages to parties that have evil designs on the herds of the Double Cross Ranch."

"Them, you mean, don't you, Ned," added Jack, "because that message spoke of there being five all told who would look out and see that things were made easy picking."

"Well," spoke up Jimmy, with a cunning leer, "sometimes you think I'm sleepy, but I notice that now and then I manage to wake up long enough to do my little stunt. His handle, it's Ally Sloper, by the same token."

"Who's that?" asked Harry.

"The dub that owns the homing pigeons," came the ready reply, which caused Ned to smile and nod his head in approbation.

"Good work, Jimmy!" he remarked, "you must have asked the fellow you rode in behind?"

"Just what I did, Ned," Jimmy told him. "I mentioned the fact that we had seen a pigeon flying, and then he says as how this same Ally Sloper he had got about five birds from a feller over in Kingman, on the railroad beyond the Opal and the Blue Ridge Mountains down in

Arizona. He was told to let one go every little while, to see if they'd get safe home again. But, fellers, that place lies to the southeast as you know, and we saw that pigeon away off to the *northwest* of here, which says Ally Sloper he just lies!"

"That's a fine start," commended the scout master. "We know who the chief spy is, and it ought to be an easy thing to learn who his close pals seem to be, for like as not he'd stick only to those who are in the same boat with him."

"Sounds well to me, Ned," Jack remarked, after apparently turning the matter over carefully in his mind.

"What's the game?" asked Jimmy.

"Here's the way it stands," remarked Ned, soberly. "That second message must have been sent to tell the gang that both bosses are away, and conditions looking good for a raid to-night."

"Whew! so soon as that?" ejaculated Jack, drawing a long sigh, for he was pretty tired and had calculated on getting rested up between sunset and another dawn; if, as they suspected, there were going to be great goings-on around the cattle ranch before many hours, it was possible that they might be on the jump all night; but then, Jack was a fellow who could stand considerable punishment without throwing up the sponge, and that intake of breath might simply mean a resolution to do his part in the drama.

"If there was only some way now to round the cattle up and drive them into the stockades or corrals, so they could be guarded," Ned continued, as though he might have been doing more or less planning before the critical moment arrived, "why, we might hold the fort until morning and not lose any of the herds."

"Do you suppose it could be done?" Harry wanted to know.

"I see no reason why not," came the sturdy reply. "It looked to me like the herds were grazing within a few miles of here, though there may be some further off. Now, if the punchers only got the fever on them, I've no doubt they could round the steers and cows up and get them in the stockade long before the rustlers would think of coming along."

"There's one bully thing about it," ventured Harry, smilingly. "We're going to have a full moon to-night, and a cattle drive will be a picnic. If it was pitch dark, or stormy, it might be a different story. The scout luck holds good. Things may look a bit gloomy for a while, but we get there in the end."

"I'll tell you one reason why it's important that we should find out just who the cronies of this Ally Sloper are," continued Ned. "It would be a bad thing now if we sent the whole five out in a batch, because, believing their game was up and that it would be unsafe for them to ever

come back here, chances are they would take advantage of their opportunity to run off a herd while about it."

"Might as well be hung for a sheep as a lamb—is that what you mean, Ned?" Jack asked.

"Yes, about that way," the scout master replied. "On the other hand, if they are broken up, and only one sent out with each bunch of punchers to corral the herds, these spies will not be able to work anything crooked. We'll draw their claws, as you might say, and make them harmless."

"Here comes my aunt," Harry broke in with, as a large woman brushed out of the doorway of the commodious ranch house and approached them.

She was an amiable woman, they could see at first glance; but Ned fancied that, in an emergency, Aunt Mehitabel would not prove capable of gripping the reins. No doubt, during all her married life she had depended on her able husband to manage things on the outside, being content on her part to see that things moved along regularly within doors, and that meals came on time.

She greeted Harry warmly and was also delighted to meet his chums, all of whom she urged to go inside the house with her.

But the occasion was so serious that Ned did not wish to waste any more time than was absolutely necessary.

"We've come to make you quite a little visit, ma'm," Ned remarked, after she had urged them to make themselves at home, and do whatever they pleased, "and later on we expect to have a great time riding around the country and seeing things. But it is unfortunate that neither one of Harry's uncles is home right now, because we've got some very important news."

The lady of the house looked worried at once, just as Ned had anticipated would be the case.

"Oh! what can it be?" she asked, her voice showing traces of nervousness.

"On the way our chum, Jimmy here, happened to shoot a hawk that had pounced down on a flying pigeon. Wrapped around one of the pigeon's legs was a piece of tissue paper, and bearing a message. I have it here with me, and both the hawk and the pigeon are in one of our packs on the burros. This message was not signed, but it plainly announced that there are five untrustworthy men employed on this place who are in league with cattle rustlers."

"Mercy on us, you don't say! And the colonel away, too! Whatever will become of us now?" Mrs. Haines started to wail, when Ned smilingly went on to soothe her by remarking:

"But here are four stout boys, ready to do their level best to upset the plans of these cattle thieves, if given half a chance, ma'm. Now, in this message, it is promised that if the conditions

look favorable, another line will be sent, the same way as this was. And as we came up we saw a pigeon flying into the west, so we take it for granted that has been done, and the rustler crowd will get busy between now and sun-up."

"The herds are all out on the range, unfortunately, and it is too late now to get them in," the lady went on to say, dejectedly. "Oh! how unfortunate that you did not arrive a few hours ago, when my husband would have been here to take charge of things, for we have no foreman, you know."

"It may not be too late, even now, to get the herds rounded up and brought in to the corral where the boys can guard them," Ned told her.

She looked at him admiringly, doubtless impressed, as many others had been before then, with his manly bearing and the resolute look on his face.

"I really believe that if any one could manage it, you could, my son!" she said, with a simplicity and ardor that caused the warm glow to spread over Ned's face.

"With what assistance you might give us, Mrs. Haines, we believe we can save the cattle from this threatened raid," he continued, calmly. "And first of all it is of the utmost importance that we learn just who these other four punchers may be who are hand in glove with Ally Sloper—the man who has sent the pigeon messenger."

"Oh! so he is the one?" she cried, "and I never could bear the sight of his face, because of the cast in that evil eye of his. But Job always laughed at me, and said Ally Soper was one of the best men he had on the place. What do you want me to do, for you said I could help you win out?"

"First of all, in the absence of your husband and Harry's other uncle," began the scout master, just for all the world, Jimmy thought, like a great general, such as Napoleon or Grant, laying out his campaign, "it seems as if the men would take orders from you. Am I right there?

"Yes, it has happened a few times, but I would not have known a thing about what to do, only for Chunky's advice," she told him.

"Oh! you can rely on Chunky then, can you?" asked Ned, quickly, for that was one of the points he wanted settled, because a great deal depended on it.

"Always. My husband would trust him with his life. If ever we do have a foreman at the Double Cross, Chunky will be the one."

"I'm glad to hear that, because I rode in behind him, and somehow I fancied he would be the one to confide in. Please send out for him as soon as you can, ma'm, because we have little time to waste. I hope to learn from Chunky just who the other four traitors are, for he will have noticed how this Ally Soper picks out his

friends. Birds of a feather flock together, you know; and these fellows would feel safer if they kept in constant touch with each other."

The other scouts approved of what Ned was doing, as their manner of nodding at different times indicated They knew that their leader was equal to running things, even though he might not know so much about the working of a cattle ranch. And in times gone by they had seen him pitted against what seemed to be overwhelming odds, to win out in the end; so that they had unbounded confidence in whatever he started to do.

The rancher's wife left them for a minute, and presently came back to say that she had sent out the Chink cook, Chin-chin Charlie, to find Chunky, and tell him to come right to the house on important business.

"We'll get this working pretty soon, I think," Jack declared, with animation.

"And they'll just have to hunt up some broncs for the lot of us to straddle, too," added Harry.

"Tell me about that," chuckled Jimmy. "How glad I'll be to mount a fiery charger and dig me heels into his flanks, after all this terrible walkin' the lot of us have been doin' lately. I do be wishin' Chunky'd hurry. If he's gone off now, and couldn't be found at the bunk-house, we'll be in a nice pickle, sure."

"Don't worry, because I think he's coming," Ned told him.

Just as he said, this lanky puncher came up on the verandah of the ranch. He was quickly put in possession of the facts, and expressed himself in forcible terms concerning the alleged treachery of Ally Sloper and his four allies.

"I c'n put a hand on the hull blooming lot," he declared, "because it happens as how that same Ally has been keein' company with jest four punchers. They are Lefty Louie, Coyote Smith, Bob Caruso that the boys calls Robinson Crusoe, and Tinplate George—all clever punchers, but mighty slick articles at that. If Miss Haines sez as how we take our orders from you, Ned, just give the word, and you'll see them warts arounded up like grease."

"Oh! well, we ought to go to extremes only as a last resort, I think," said Mrs Haines, who dreaded lest there be some shooting in making the arrest, and that some of the boys who were her favorites would get hurt. "Ned has a plan that might answer the same purpose. Tell him about it, Ned, please."

So the scout master unfolded his scheme.

"How many herds are there on the range just now, Chunky?" he asked.

"Four, all told, with a smattering of others that don't 'mount to much."

"Suppose, then, you make me out a list of the

punchers, so that there will be one of these suspects with every bunch, not counting Ally Sloper," Ned continued.

"Hello! I'm beginnin' to tumble to the game and, let me say, it fills the bill first-class," was the quick comment of the lanky one.

He gave the names to Ned as rapidly as the other could write them down; and it was speedily arranged, so that of the four parties one of the conspirators had been designated to accompany each. As for Ally himself, it did not matter much what he did, though they must keep him under surveillance, lest he upset all their cleverly laid plans by cutting the corral or, in some other fashion, rendering it impossible to keep all the hundreds of long-horns near the ranch house, where they could be guarded.

All this was fixed up in a very short space of time and then Ned declared they ought to get busy. The sun was sinking toward the western horizon; but they knew there was going to be no period of darkness, because the moon was full, which meant that it would rise exactly at sunset.

"We can eat after we've got those herds rounded up and safe in the corral, not before," was Ned's ultimatum, when Mrs. Haines spoke about supper; and this caused one long face to make itself seen among the scouts, for Jimmy dearly loved his feed.

CHAPTER XII.

NIPPING A MUTINY.

Once Chunky knew what was expected of him, and he proved that he could do things with a hurricane rush. Most cow-punchers are of his stripe, and speed is a mania on the range.

"First thing I'll run out some ponies for you young fellers to mount," he told the scouts, as he turned to leave the verandah where the short talk had taken place.

"Me for a piebald mustang!" called out Jimmy, "I've somehow had that in my mind ever since I set eyes on that speckled pony belongin' to Amos. Fix me up that way, if you want to see me happy, Mister Chunky."

And greatly to Jimmy's delight, he was later on given just such a mount as he called for; though as for Ned, he did not wholly fancy the peculiar whitish eyes that were a feature of the fancy looking beast. He imagined that the animal had an ugly temper, if crossed, and hoped that Jimmy might not rue the day he yearned for a mottled cow pony.

Meanwhile the big bell had been clanged that would serve as a signal to tell all on the place

that their presence was immediately desired. They came trooping out of the bunk house and from the direction of the corral, where it chanced they had been busily engaged at the time.

Curiosity could be seen stamped on most of their bronzed faces. Ned looked for the man called Ally Sloper, and who had been described to him so cleverly that he fancied he could pick him out among the throng.

Even if he had not been advised beforehand, he knew he could have settled upon the man; because, while nearly all the others seemed jolly and carefree, his face bore a dark frown.

Ned believed the man suspected something; that he feared this hasty and unusual summons might interfere with the cunning scheme engineered for that night. And while not appearing to watch the puncher at all, Ned could easily see that he made frequent signals, when he thought himself unobserved, to several others, whom Ned also marked down as the secret allies of the rustler's spy.

These things, while seemingly unimportant, were really of considerable consequence, because much depended on their keeping the traitors from communicating with their friends in the hills.

"Is that Sloper with the hat on the back of his head?" he asked Chunky, in a low tone, as the men were coming up.

"Yes, and the one with him is Lefty Louie; that sneak trailin' along at his heels is Coyote Smith. Bob Caruso is the feller larfin' right now, and which makes him look like he could swallow a heifer easy; and Tinplate George is at the end of the bunch, limpin' some, 'count of a fling he got yesterday with a buckin' broncho. Got 'em all sized up now, have ye, Ned?"

"Yes, and tell Mrs. Haines to start the circus right away, Chunky," was the reply.

The rancher's wife had been nervously waiting for a sign. She now stepped forward and held up her hand, so that all noise ceased, and the men listened eagerly, for their curiosity had been greatly excited.

"During the absence of Colonel Haines and Mr. Henshaw, you are to take your orders from this young man here, Ned Nestor, and through Chunky, who will act as temporary foreman. An emergency has arisen, making it very necessary that all out herds be rounded up immediately and driven into the big corral, where they can be guarded to-night. Ask no questions, but do your duty as employees of this ranch. That is all I wish to say, and I feel sure that every one of you will understand that I am in consultation with those I have put in charge and that it is my wishes they are carrying out."

The punchers stared at each other. They could, of course, give a pretty good guess what

this must mean, for the only real danger that could be feared at this time of year would be from rustlers.

As a rule, they were a jolly lot of care-free fellows, willing to work double one day and loaf the next, as the occasion arose; it was all in the line of business with them.

Ned had been watching Ally Sloper out of the tail of his eye. He saw the man scowl like a pirate of the Spanish Main. Of course, this was going to interfere seriously with all the well-laid plans between the spies and their rustler allies. They may have waited a long time for this very chance, when both proprietors of the ranch would be away at the same time; and, now that it had come, to be balked in their designs was enough to throw such a tempestuous man into a fury.

"He's going to make trouble right away, Ned," whispered Jack in the ear of the scout master.

"Let him try it, and see what he runs up against, that's all," Ned replied, as he watched Ally Sloper pushing his way to the front.

Somehow the other four did not follow him. They were wise enough to realize that such a move might expose them to suspicion. If Sloper chose to protest against being sent out on the range at this late hour of the day, that was his privilege; but there was no necessity for them

to show their hand so early in the game. They knew what the anger of cow-punchers was like and had a healthy respect for it.

Before the advancing man could get near enough to say anything, Chunky began to speak as though he did not notice this aggressive movement.

"I'll head one party, and with me will go Arizona Tom, Dutchy, Ally Sloper and two of the visitors at the ranch. Skinny will take another party to bring in the herd from the alfalfa prairie," and so he went on apportioning the men, placing one he could positively trust at the head of each detachment, and making sure that each squad held a "suspect."

It had all been well laid out, and in the strongest bunch, consisting of seven riders, two of the unfaithful lot had been included. Each party had been given a particular herd to manage, so that the work could be carried out in systematic order.

Of course, Chunky intended to give the several leaders a quiet tip before they started out, so that they could keep an eye on the suspects and thwart any move that looked as though they meant to slip away, or send warning to their friends in the hills.

Sloper had stood and listened to what Chunky said. Evidently it confirmed what suspicions he may have already had concerning the breaking

up of their plot. And he would have been a stupid man not to have connected the coming of the scouts with this sudden move, looking to a round-up that had not been ordered by the proprietors of the big ranch.

Some of the men had started to hurry away; others stood there in a half-hesitating way, as though they had noticed the belligerent attitude of Ally Sloper and wished to see what he meant to do. He may have given trouble on other past occasions and was only kept on account of his acknowledged skill as a puncher.

"Hold on there, Chunky, I want to say as I aint agoin' out on the range with ye this time. I reckons as how I've done a good hard day's work a'ready. 'Sides that, take it from me straight that I don't mean to look to a *kid* like this here newcomer for my boss. I'm alayin' down on the job for onct, see?"

"No, I don't see, Sloper," returned the emaciated puncher, facing the other, a gleam in his eyes that was not nice to watch. "Are you sick?"

"What, me? Did ye ever know me to be sick? No, 'taint that. I jest don't keer to work any more to-day. I'm agoin' to the bunk house an' lie down to smoke."

"You're goin' out on the range with me, Sloper, hear that?" gritted Chunky, as he faced the other defiantly. "You heard the rancher's

wife give her orders; and, also, the fact that she says as how we are all to look to this young chap as her representative; likewise that I'm to advise him, seein' as how he ain't well up in range ways. I've selected *you* to be in my party. I want you for a good many reasons, one o' which are that you ain't got anything on me when it comes to roundin' up long-horns. So make up your mind you're agoin' out and help git that prize herd in from the Washout Coulie."

"I don't take my orders from any snip like that, I tell you, and I ain't agoin' to stand for you bein' foreman here, Chunky, understand that!" the mutineer rasped, while four other punchers moved a little closer and waited to see how their ally came through, before they tried to copy his tactics; if he succeeded, they could follow suit; whereas, should he make a failure, they were at liberty to draw back and hold their horses for a more convenient season.

"Oh! is that so, Sloper?" remarked the tall puncher, quickly, "an' tell me how you expect to keep from goin' out on the range with my party?"

"I throw up my job right here, see?" almost shouted Sloper. "You get what I says, don't you? You can't order me around, when I'm a free agent. And I ain't workin' for the Double Cross people any more. I'm done."

"Oh! yes, you are," sneered Chunky. "We'll just look into that, Sloper. I reckons as how Colonel Job fixed things so he could count on *your* services a certain time. You're under contract here. Mrs. Haines, kin you tell me how much longer Sloper's agreement to work for the owners of the Double Cross Ranch, or whoever they chose to app'nt foreman here, has to run?"

"Just two months more," replied the colonel's wife, who kept the books of the ranch and, therefore, knew all about the dealings with all the hands.

"That settles it then, Sloper," said Chunky. "We need your services right bad to git them cattle into the stockade. And let me tell you right here, you're agoin' out on the range with us now and work alongside the rest of the boys, or somethin' is likely to happen right suddent."

He carelessly let his hand slip around to the butt of his gun while saying this. Jimmy and, perhaps Harry, anticipated seeing some fireworks, because they thought Sloper was a gunfighter; but Ned could read character better and he had already decided that the man had a craven soul back of all his bluster. So he was not at all surprised to see him quail before the steady gaze of Chunky.

"This is a raw deal you're givin' me, Chunky!" he muttered.

"I'm doin' jest what Colonel Job'd do if he

was on the spot, and one of his contract men tried to lay down on him," retorted the other positively. "After he gits back, if you care to take it up with him, ye kin do it. But while I'm runnin' things, alongside o' this younker here, you'll do your part, or I'll know the reason why. Now, boys, git your ponies and we'll be off. Thar's a heap o' hard work to do afore we kin take things easy."

He managed matters so that he could say a few words to Skinny and the other two dependable punchers who had been placed in charge of the third and fourth parties.

They were told to keep a watchful eye on the suspected ones, though there was no time to explain just why. But, after all, there could be but one reason for giving this warning, and Skinny, as well as the other leaders, were able to figure it out. They had already guessed that news had come concerning a contemplated foray on the part of rustlers and that these men were suspected of being hand in glove with the lawless night runners of cattle.

There was presently a bustling scene as the punchers saddled their ponies and prepared for hard work out on the range.

Chunky managed to keep close to Ally Sloper all of the time and the man, seeing this, did not dare venture anything like flight, lest he be followed by a shower of bullets.

Orders were given for ponies for the four scouts and it was not long before they found themselves mounted on frisky bronchos, which it took all their skill to manage. But fortunately all of them had done considerable riding in times past, so that they did themselves credit. And doubtless the punchers had picked animals that, according to their way of thinking, were exceedingly docile, though quite lively enough to suit Ned and his chums.

There was Jimmy grinning from the back of a beautifully spotted animal, and apparently as happy as any one could be. He had found a way to sling his gun, so as to have both hands free to manage the mount; and, truth to tell, there were times when Jimmy was apt to wish he had a third hand in the bargain, for the calico pony proved to be the most unruly one of the quartette.

All this was done in a comparatively short time, because each puncher looked out for himself. Harry and Jack were to accompany Skinny's bunch, while Jimmy and Ned meant to be with Chunky. This arrangement satisfied the scout master, who felt that if there was anything going on it was apt to be in connection with that detachment which had Ally Sloper on its roll call. And, as usual, Ned wanted to be on the firing line when things were happening.

Owing to various causes Chunky's bunch was the last to get away. In three separate directions could be seen little clouds of alkali dust in which the reckless riders had vanished, heading for the feeding grounds of the herds, to which they had been assigned.

As these lay some miles away, and the task of rounding up the cattle, as well as driving them on the return trip, would consume considerable time, it was not expected that the first of the herds would reach the stockade until the moon was several hours high.

When Ned and Jimmy galloped forth, keeping close to the other four riders, they turned in the saddle to wave to the stockman's wife, who stood on the piazza, to see the last of them off, with the Chinese cook close by, and also a couple of women, who were also employed in the house.

The scout master believed he had reason to feel satisfied, because he had been allowed to balk the treacherous designs of those who would have sacrificed the property of their employer by sending word to the cattle rustlers. But as his eye wandered over to where the sullen Ally Sloper sat his saddle, Ned knew that this was hardly the end. A man of his double nature was not apt to throw up his hands and acknowledge himself beaten, just because he had been knocked down in the first round.

"He'll bear close watching," was Ned's mental comment, "and even then chances are he may find a way to slip us, when the excitement of rounding-up the steers and the cows is on. But once we get the herd started home, I don't believe he'd be able to do us any great harm, if he did skip out. Still, Chunky is dealing with the hound and I mustn't interfere."

CHAPTER XIII.

AT WASHOUT COULIE.

"Is it very far we have to go for our herd, Ned?" asked Jimmy, as he galloped along briskly at the side of his chum, managing the calico pony pretty fairly for one who had never been used to range riding and knew very little about the tricks of cow ponies.

"Yes, I believe further than any others of the lot?" Ned told him.

"I heard some mention of a Washout Coulie; is that where we're headin' right now; and why d'ye reckon they give it such a funny name?' Jimmy continued.

"We're making for a place of that name, I understood Chunky to say," the accommodating scout master replied, "and he spoke as though their best herd might be using that section for a feeding ground just now; but why they call it Washout Coulie, I'm unable to say."

"A coulie is always connected with some sort of hill, isn't it, Ned?"

"Strikes me that way, Jimmy, and, as you know there *are* hills over this way, for we could see them when we came from the west and struck

the ranch. It might be the name came from a washout that happened some time ago. They don't get much rain in this region, but once in a long time there's a regular cloudburst and a flood."

Jimmy might have tried to keep the conversation going, for there were a number of things he wanted to ask the scout master; but it happened that the obstreperous calico pony developed a streak of ugliness just about that time and, consequently, Jimmy had all he could do to manage the beast so as to keep his seat in the cowboy saddle.

The sun had set shortly after they started away from the ranch, and the sky took on the brightest red colors that could be imagined. But neither of the boys felt in a humor to admire the view. They had business on their hands of a nature to engross their every thought—Jimmy, with the control of his vicious mottle mount; and Ned, in calculating what the ill-natured suspect might attempt, in order to outwit those who were pitted against him.

Night settles down promptly after sunset in this far southern country, there being very little gloaming, such as people living in more northern latitudes are accustomed to. But as the moon was due to peep above the eastern horizon in short time this was not apt to give them any trouble.

Besides, Chunky and his riders knew every rod of the plain and could easily avoid such places, where the prairie dogs had their underground homes and which have been the means of breaking the legs of many valuable horses.

Ned had already noticed how careful Chunky was to keep in a certain position on the gallop. Here he could watch Sloper and at the same time be ready to draw quickly upon him should the suspect attempt any crooked business.

"He doesn't trust the man any further than he can see him," Ned was telling himself, as he noticed this game that was being played between the two men; and, at the same time, he meant to try and keep his own eye on the slippery customer, in so far as the conditions would allow.

The evening star shone in the western sky and they were making in a straight line away from it, Ned noticed. This told him what the course was. While Jimmy was apparently paying not the least attention to such things, content to trust himself in the hands of the puncher guide, Ned believed in knowing for himself. There might arise an occasion where he would be thrown on his own resources; and, in such an event, it would be a valuable asset to know just which way to head, in order to fetch up at the ranch house.

That was scout tactics and scout practice—being prepared against possible need.

And now over the low rim in the far east, where the squatty hills lay against the sky line, a yellow glow began to appear. It was the moon rising to fulfill a night's vigil as sentinel while men slept.

Ned greeted it as an old friend, and Jimmy, too, expressed his satisfaction over seeing it come upon the scene, for Jimmy and darkness never did agree, and that was one reason he always wanted to keep the fire burning through the night while in camp, during the period when there was no moon.

As they drew closer to the hills, Ned began to calculate just about how many miles they would have to drive the herd once they managed to round it up and get it on the run for home. He knew from what he had been told that what had taken them not more than an hour to cover, as the crow flies, would mean at least four times that length of time with the cattle.

Perhaps, they would not be in until midnight had come and gone. And who could say what might not happen in the long interval.

He wondered how far the rustlers were ready to go, in order to run off a herd that had excited their cupidity and, whether in case they happened to come up while the punchers were busily engaged, they might not attempt something like a stampede, hoping to frighten the few cowboys off, when they could make way with the cattle.

"I'm glad we brought our rifles along with us," Ned was telling himself, as he studied out these things and tried to imagine what it would seem like to actually find himself engaged in a regular battle with cattle thieves.

He urged his pony forward enough to bring him close to Chunky.

"How much further do we have to go, Chunky?" Ned inquired.

"Be there in about ten minutes or so," came the reply. "Gotter kinder sheer off a bit hereabouts on 'count of them ornery marmots what makes it unsafe for a pony to run over their holes. Been tryin' to clean this village out a long time, but they seem too smart for the hull lot o' us. If so be ye wanter practice usin' a rifle ye'll find plenty to shoot at in knockin' these little runts over; and do the stockmen a big favor in the bargin."

"We'll remember that," Ned told him, though he rather fancied that during their stay at Double Cross Ranch he and his three chums would want to do most of their hunting for larger game than poor little harmless prairie dogs.

Jimmy had forged ahead slightly, or rather his impatient and abitious mount had taken the bit in its mouth and pulled a little harder than usual. It may have been accident, but to Ned it seemed as though Ally Sloper must have some

vicious idea in his mind when he suddenly flung his quirt vigorously out, apperently intending to give his own pony a cruel cut, and then struck the calico mount ridden by Jimmy.

Perhaps he thought to create a little excitement if the beast ran away with its rider, during which he might find a chance to slip off unobserved. Ned, as quick as a flash, dug his heels into his own pony, and was alongside Jimmy almost as soon as the spotted beast started to leap wildly forward under the impetus of that blow from the quirt, something he had never stood for in the past.

When he bent down and seized hold of the bridle close to the pony's mouth Ned was uttering soothing words. Between his efforts and those of the rider, the pony was kept from bolting, though it snorted and acted ugly.

"I'm afraid you'll have to pay dear for picking out that calico nag, Jimmy," Ned told his chum, when they were riding along side by side after the little matter had been settled for the time being.

"'Tis too late to make any difference," replied the other scout; "and do you remember tellin' me once that it's no time to change mounts when crossin' a stream? Now that I've started on this painted pony I'll stick to the same through

good winds and foul. If the little cayuse c'n dump me, he's welcome to try, that's all."

Evidently Jimmy's old stubborn nature was on deck again. He did hate to give anything up the worst kind; though he admitted that there were some exceptions to this rule and one of them was whenever he found himself on a sickening heaving sea.

"I hope the cattle will be found feedin' in the place they called a coulie?" Jimmy went on to say a minute later, as he strove earnestly to make out the conformation of the low hills they were approaching.

Now Ned had just been wondering on his own account what Chunky expected to do in case the herd had wandered away. Would he start to follow them, making use of his training as a tracker in order to stick to the trail the animals would have left behind them?

Ned believed so. He had studied the lanky puncher well, and found evidences of great pertinacity in his make-up. Chunky would not be the one to quit easily. On the contrary, Ned felt positive he would keep moving if it took the remainder of that night.

"Chances are they'll not wander far away, Jimmy," he told the other scout, who was evidently beginning to cross bridges before he came to them, as was his habit, and so attempt more or less unnecessary work.

"But I don't hear any signs of the critters, do you, Ned?" continued Jimmy.

"Why no, and you couldn't hardly expect to, what with all the noise we're making," Ned replied, shortly; "though the wind is coming almost in our faces, and seems like we might hear if a bull bellowed. But leave all that to Chunky. He knows what to do, Jimmy. Just look out for your pony, and keep close by; that's all you've got to do."

Gradually the hills assumed more shape, and they could even make out the trees that covered their sides in most quarters.

"That dark place ahead must be the coulie opening," Ned suggested.

"Just what it is," replied the lanky rider. "You foller it up a ways and all of a sudden-like you drop in on one of the finest little valleys that cattle ever nosed about in, knee-high in grass that ain't the buffalo stripe neither, and with a fine spring that sends its water down the hull place. We ain't got anythin' ekal to it for a harbor for cattle this side o' the Colorado. That's why we turned our prize herd in here, to pick up a little fat before the Kunnel he ships the same off to a show."

That was quite a long talk for Chunky to make. He was a man of few words as a rule and bit his sentences off as though it pained him to run on for any great length of time.

Ned understood. And he was glad that he had come with the man who was now temporarily in charge of Double Cross Ranch. Where Chunky happened to be things were more apt to take place than elsewhere.

Now it was very likely that the waiting rustlers must have known all about this unusually fine heard. Even if they had failed to locate it on their own account, while galloping around the country, Ally Sloper would have put them wise.

If they were figuring on making way with any portion of the Double Cross property shortly, it stood to reason that they would turn their attention first of all to this valuable drove.

The moon had risen above the horizon and was pouring a flood of light upon the scene. Ned could not remember when it had appeared more radiant. He fancied that they would have very little trouble in making the round-up and drive, if only nothing happened to break up their well laid plans.

No doubt when they had arrived at the bottom of the coulie Chunky would order a short halt, in order to let the ponies get their wind again. And during that time they could be using their ears to catch any sounds that might come from up the gully, such as the mooing of cows that had calves, the bellowing of a bull, or the clash-

ing as horns beat against horns in a fierce fight for possession.

Sloper was still in line. He had not turned his face once toward Chunky since starting from the ranch, and it was natural that he should be laboring under a high tension, possibly arranging scheme after scheme, only to cast them away when he discovered weak points.

Ned believed the fellow was only waiting to see what circumstances would do for him; and he felt that should the opening come he would be as quick as a flash to avail himself of it.

Well, here they were now at the foot of the hills, and apparently their fast gallop must be be near its end. Jimmy would not be sorry. He was sore with being bounced about in that hard saddle, though no one could have forced him to admit that he was having anything but a glorious time. But Jimmy was always full of grit, and disdained to call for help unless it could not possibly be avoided. He would master that fancy calico pony, or know the reason why.

"Hold up!"

When Chunky called this out every one drew rein. They were undoubtedly in the mouth of a coulie, which was merely a gully through which at various times in the ages that had passed floods had swept down the side of the hills, and following a set course washed this bed

clear. Later on bushes and even trees had managed to obtain a foothold and seemed to thrive.

The horses were breathing heavilly, as the six riders sat in their saddles and listened eagerly to catch any sounds that might come down from the feeding plateau above.

There was no lack of noise, as the two scouts quickly understood. And if cattle made all those sounds while feeding Ned wondered what it would be under stress of excitement and panic, when stampeded by a storm, or from some other cause.

He could hear much trampling, low bellowing, the mooing of cows fearful lest they be separated from their calves, and a confusion of other sounds of which, being more or less of a greenhorn on the range, he could make nothing.

But it was different with Chunky and the other punchers. Their trained ears, accustomed to detecting even uneasiness in feeding stock, and guessing the cause, instantly picked up serveral things that told them the startling truth.

When Ned himself plainly heard the neigh of an excited horse, and then what appeared to be a half suppressed shout, he jumped to a sudden conclusion that very nearly took his breath away.

Something not down on the bills was certainly going on up there, where the prize herd fed.

There were men there and they were stirring up the cattle, for the snap of whips could be heard together with various other sounds such as Ned fancied might accompany the start of a drive.

He could give a pretty good guess what it all meant, and did not have to wait for Chunky to pass the information along. Some other persons besides themselves had taken a notion to start a round-up that was not ordered, and right then were busily engaged in getting things moving.

Apparently the punchers had not arrived any too soon, for the rustlers were undoubtedly abroad; and had the range riders been delayed another half hour they must have arrived at Washout Coulie to find the feeding grounds bare, and discover that the herd had mysteriously vanished!

CHAPTER XIV.

STAMPEDING THE PRIZE BUNCH

"Steady, Ally, and don't try it!" Chunky was saying in a low but tense voice. He seemed to have suspected that the treacherous puncher would be greatly excited over the fact that his friends were at work above, and might take considerable chances in order to let them know the men from the Double Cross had arrived on the scene of action unannounced.

They gathered in a little clump. The other two puncher must have guessed why Chunky was acting in this way toward Sloper, for they eyed the latter suspiciously, and Ned could see that Arizona Tom had his heavy gun in his hand, as though ready to use it promptly should the other try to dash away without authority.

"Seems like we didn't get here any to soon, hey, Ned?" ventured Jimmy, with one of his hoarse whispers.

"Same old luck keeps after us," was the reply of the scout master; "as long as that holds good I should worry more for the other fellow than on our account."

"It's them pesky rustlers that have hit up

a hot pace, and got on the ground ahead o' us," Chunky was growling; and then, as though his humor changed, he went on to add: "but say, mebbe we won't give 'em the surprise o' their lives."

"Then you'll tackle the bunch, even if they number more than we do?" asked Ned, seeking information while they waited for a move on the part if those who were so busily engaged up the coulie.

"Shucks! it wouldn't stop us if they was three to our one," Chunky answered, with the freedom from concern that usually marks the true cowman. "If we can surprise the critters the advantage 'll lie with us. And let me say right now that it won't be safe for any feller to get gay, and give a yip, or let his gun go off by accident, 'cause another is apt to drop into the habit, which is a bad one."

That last was undoubtedly meant for Ally Sloper. He could be heard gnashing his strong white teeth in sullen anger, but he did not venture to let out a warning whoop so as to tell his friends they were up against it.

Ned could not blame him, for he fancied that it might have been the last shout Ally would ever make, because this was a serious business, betraying the interests of his employer, and should he be shot no blame would ever be

attached to the one carrying out the punishment.

"Move over this way a leetle," said Chunky, presently, as though he knew just how the cattle and their drivers must issue forth from the mouth of the coulie when the time came, and meant to set the trap so as to take the rustlers off their guard.

"Whew! tell me about this, will you?" Jimmy was breathing in the ear of his companion scout, as they tried to keep their ponies quiet, sitting in the shadow of the trees, and listening to all the clamor that arose further up the slope of the hill.

"If you think this is exciting, Jimmy," remarked Ned, "wait till the climax comes along, and then see what happens. To think of our getting in a lively affair like this the very first night we're at the ranch. And somebody said all the fun was in the past. Looks like we find it wherever we go."

"Well, you never spoke truer words, Ned," admitted Jimmy; "and honest now, I'm tremblin' all over right at this minute, not because I'm scared a whiff, for you know I ain't, but just on account of the strain. Oh! I hope they don't take a notion to slip away up the coulie 'stead of droppin' down and takin' their medicine like men."

"Listen! they're coming, I do believe, Jimmy!"

"Sounds like it, Ned. I never had the pleasure of handin' it out to a cattle rustler, but I've heard they are pretty tough citizens; and in case I do have to puncture a few with disabling wounds it needn't keep me awake nights. Them longhorns has got to be saved, and we're here to do it."

"Stow your gab, Jimmy, and be ready to do what you're told. Chunky gives the orders for the entertainment, remember, and be quick to act. Yes, the cattle have been headed this way. They're running down the coulie right now!"

With the increasing noise the excitement grew apace. Both scouts shut their teeth hard together, and awaited the breaking of the crisis. The oncoming herd was drawing closer with every second that passed. Undoubtedly those who were driving them out of the feeding ground knew that this was the only way by means of which the herd could be started, because further up the coulie merged into a blind canyon that must have proven a trap.

If there had been the slightest doubt in any one's mind before now concerning the truth, it would have been dissipated when the loud voices of men came floating down, with the crash of many cloven hoofs and the protestations

from the unwilling cattle, doubtless preparing to settle down for the night when this drive was started.

Chunky must have been aware of the fact that it would be next to impossible to keep watch over Ally Sloper when the crisis dawned. Perhaps he really did not care so much whether the other escaped or not, since he could no longer upset the plans they had laid, by giving warning.

And on his part Sloper may have figured that he could not afford to openly prove himself a traitor by fleeing. He could not know that they had any positive proof of his double dealing, and just suspicion he could live down. So he might even act as though he were an honest man and carry out his part in the work of saving the threatened herd. His life counted for more than the success of his allies in the raid. He could make new connections with other schemers; but once he had been strung up to a telegraph pole by furious punchers he could not get a new life.

The noise grew more distinct, and at any minute now Ned expected to see a mass of moving animals come out of the dark mouth of the coulie.

He took it for granted that the cattle raiders were to be treated harshly, for he knew what a contempt honest punchers felt toward those who would carry off four-footed property be-

longing to others, and changing the brand, sell it as if it were their own.

That meant more or less gunfire; it might be that wounds would be received as well as given, for these rustlers were a dare-devil lot, and no doubt ready to fight desperately before giving up their ill-gotten gains.

This did not cause Ned to quail. He had received his baptism of fire long ago, and for one of his age had been through so much of excitement that he might almost be called a veteran. Nevertheless he was thrilled with the thought of surprising the thieves, and his heart beat much more rapidly than usual as he sat in his saddle, keeping a firm grip on his pony, and holding his rifle ready for quick action.

Yes, they are coming very fast now. The clatter of cloven hoofs, and all those other accompanying sounds, told this plainly. Ned wondered how many of the raiders there might turn out to be. He tried to count the different kinds of shouts and whoops, but found this next to impossible.

"What does it matter," he told himself, finally; "just as Chunky said, if we take them by surprise the advantage is all with us? Five or ten, we'll send them flying over the plain, thinking they've run foul of the whole Double Cross outfit. Jimmy, when the time comes to cut loose yelpt like a Fiji Islander, or anything else that makes a big noise; get that?"

"You wait," was all Jimmy replied, but there was a world of meaning back of the words, and Ned knew he would do his duty.

"There they come!" said one of the cow punchers just then.

Out from the shadows of the coulie burst a string of cattle on the run. They had been started with difficulty, but once the excitement began to work there would be no restraining them until weariness caused them to stop their flight.

Chunky was eagerly watching to see how they turned. He doubtless anticipated that one or more of the rustlers would be seeking to head off, and then would be the time to open fire, so as to create a small-sized panic among the cattle raiding crowd.

"Gee whiz! but I'm awonderin' what this beast'll do when I let go with the gun right over his head!" Jimmy remarked just about that time, which seemed to indicate that he believed he had cause for worry.

"Keep a tight hold of your bridle; that's all you can do," the scout master advised, without removing his eyes from the picture that was enlarging with each passing second, as more cattle came running out of the coulie, and followed the leaders.

From the midst of the lowing herd there suddenly burst two horsemen. They were

swinging their hats, waving their arms, and evidently shouting at the top of their shrill voices, with the object of turning the running herd in the direction they wished it to go.

Many miles lay between Washout Coulie and the ranch buildings, and there was little danger that this racket might be carried there on the wings of the wind; even though it were faintly heard, chances were that the punchers would conclude not to bother, under the impression that it must be a round-up on some neigboring stock farm.

"Now! give 'em Hail Columbia!"

Ned could hear Chunky shouting these words, or something that sounded very similar. He was paying little attention to anything that was said, however, for his whole mind seemed to be taken up with following the rapid drama that was being unfolded before his eyes.

There began to sound the discharge of fire-arms. Arizona Tom, Dutch and Chunky each took a shot, and Jimmy not to be outdone, managed to get his gun half-way to his shoulder before he pulled the trigger. Then his calico pony began to act in such an extraordinary manner that it took all Jimmy's attention, and for the time being he did not care a particle whether the two rustlers ran away, or were made to bite the dust, for it was a case of winding his arms around the neck of that bucking broncho

or else measuring his length on the ground, after flying for a dozen or two feet through the atmosphere.

The rustlers might never have known they were being fired upon if it depended on the noise alone; but then there was the flash of the several discharges; and the whistle of flying lead past their ears to warn them of the fact that they were in the danger zone.

They looked that way and must have made a discovery that was far from pleasant. Still they were not ready to give up so easily, when it had seemed that everything was coming their way.

"They mean to make a fight for the prize!" Ned told himself, when the saw a sudden flash from the spot where the two rustlers had been mixing with the herd, and which must mean that one of them was using his gun.

At that he raised his rifle. Others of the lawless tribe would be pushing into view shortly, and it was policy to scatter them in the start, so as to cut down the advantage they would have from greater numbers.

Ned had never learned how to shoot from the back of a prancing pony; but he was able to use good judgment, and pull the trigger when there was a temporary lull in operations.

He must have managed to strike the mount of one of the rustlers, much to his regret, for im-

mediately it started madly off, despite all efforts of the rider to hold the beast in. The other man finding that he alone faced the fire of the enemy made haste to turn and flee.

This, however, was only the beginning. There were others near by, and loud yells attested that they were about to burst into view, when the whole operation must be repeated.

Meanwhile the cattle continued to pour in a living stream out of the coulie. No wonder these reckless rustlers had taken great chances in order to secure this bunch, which consisted of the pick of the Double Cross herds. They had undoubtedly been kept in close touch with all that was going on by the spies who were employed on the ranch, and doubtless knew the number and value of each separate herd.

Then came whooping riders, this time some half dozen, scattered about so as to cover considerable ground. In the bright moonlight the picture was a thrilling one, and Ned believed he must often recall it in future days. The surging longhorns, the active cow ponies and their riders keeping up a continual racket, which seemed to be an essential part of the performance—all these impressed Ned greatly.

Then he heard a loud explosion close to his head.

"Give it to the night riders! Let 'em have hot

lead! Show 'em how the boys of Double Cross Ranch can stand up for Kunnel Job!"

With each short sentence Chunky was discharging his gun; and as the others kept pace with his activity there was a warm session around that quarter. Even Ally Sloper added to the din by shooting several times, and yelling, though Ned saw if none of the others did, that he aimed high, apparently not caring to take the chances of hitting one of his friends.

The utmost consternation attacked the surprised rustlers. They must have fancied that the whole force of the ranch was upon them, if noise counted for anything.

One man was seen to sway in his saddle, so that another had to help hold him in his seat. Ned himself felt sure that with one of his shots he had wounded another rustler in the arm, for he changed the bridle grip to the other hand, and dashed off at full swing, plainly demoralized.

There was no holding them, because they knew they were in the wrong, and that if their identity chanced to be discovered, in spite of the bandanas with which the lower part of their faces were concealed, the law would step in and deal with them harshly.

And so it came about that the raid on the Double Cross herd turned out to be a fizzle; though only for the prompt way in which the defenders of the prize herd started out to meet

the situation there must have been a different story to tell.

"Get the cattle headed for home!" was the slogan that went the rounds; and with Chunky still keeping close to the suspect this difficult job was undertaken. Being experts at the rounding-up process they soon had the herd headed off, and started on a new tack, now making in the direction of the ranch home.

Ned had meant to lend a hand at this work, but something that came up kept him from taking any great interest in the driving of the steers and cows. This was the strange disappearance of his chum, Jimmy McGraw!

CHAPTER XV.

JIMMY'S UNWILLING RIDE.

There was reason for alarm, Ned thought, when he made this discovery. The last he could remember seeing Jimmy was just at the time the second detachment of the cattle rustlers came bursting out from the coulie, with shouts and all the wild clamor cow punchers indulge in when driving stock.

At that time Jimmy seemed to have tamed down his calico pony enough to once more think of using his Marlin on the enemy; but strive as he might Ned could not remember having heard it's suggestive "cough" to tell that Jimmy had actually pulled the trigger.

It must have been at that exciting moment, when everything was confused, and Ned had his attention fastened on the movements of the cattle poachers, that the thing happened.

He knew Jimmy too well to even suspect that the other would run away voluntarily, for Jimmy dearly loved a "scrap," though trying to conform to scout rules, and avoid seeking trouble. This would of course mean that the frantic calico pony with the white eyes and furious

temper had taken the bit between his teeth, and actually run away with the scout.

How could they tell which way the animal had gone in making his headlong flight? Would he be apt to head for home, or else try and join the horses of the fleeing rustlers?

Ned determined to speak to Chunky about it. The puncher might be able to offer good advice in the matter, seeing that he had spent all his life on the plains, and knew the habits of these tricky bronchos from the ground up.

Chunky, however, was a difficult man to approach just then, for he certainly had his hands full in getting the big herd turned toward the ranch house, and at the same time trying to keep the suspect under his eyes.

If Ned had only had his little electric torch with him he would have gotten down and examined the soil, endeavoring to get some pointers by learning in which direction the calico pony had fled.

All he could really do was to help drive the cattle home, and make up his mind that if poor Jimmy failed to show up during the remainder of the night, he would return again in the morning and do his best to follow the trail of the runaway.

He pictured the scene, with Jimmy, who was not in the class of champion riders at all, clinging to the neck of his mount, and trying to soothe the frantic beast by soft words, which must, however, have fallen on deaf ears.

When before leaving the spot Ned discovered some object shining amidst the bunches of buffalo grass, and jumping down found that it was indeed Jimmy's prized repeating rifle, he knew that his guess must be close to the truth.

Unless he wanted to be left behind he must be moving, for already had the energetic Chunky and his mates managed to turn the cattle in the right direction and the whole mass was swinging toward home. The herd, however, went unwillingly, doubtless disliking to quit their pasturage, and suspecting it was to be followed by some sort of irksome confinement, remembered only too well from times past.

Ned would not soon forget that long and tiresome drive.

Not only did the punchers have their work cut out for them in keeping the herd compact, and constantly moving toward the region where the building would finally heave in sight, but they had another duty at the same time.

There was no telling what the discomfited rustlers might not attempt. If after their temporary panic they managed to get together and compare notes, doubtless they would realize that they outnumbered the punchers who had taken the prize herd away from them so neatly and expeditiously.

In their anger they might even follow, and start hostile operations on a more savage and deter-

mined scale, with the intention of recovering their lost plunder. These cattle thieves had been getting bolder than ever of late, and there could be no telling what they might not attempt.

Consequently Chunky had given orders to his men to keep their guns "on tap," and to make quick use of the same, given any opportunity. They were thus compelled to keep on guard all the while they shouted, and chased after such steers or cows as manifested a desire to break away from the main herd.

Once he caught the spirit of the thing Ned was in his element, and the puncher afterwards admitted that the boy acted as though he had been accustomed to driving herd all his life.

Of course, with so few hands, and such a wide field to cover, it now became practically impossible for Chunky to keep close to Ally Sloper. He saw that the other appeared to be engaging in the diversion with all his accustomed vim, and it had to go at that. If the man failed to turn up when they reached the stockade, why they would be well rid of a faithless employee, that was all. It was too late now for any traitor to spoil their work by hunting up his allies and telling what he knew.

Apparently Sloper must have been figuring things out, and concluded to risk it further by sticking to the Double Cross outfit. He did not know just how far suspicion may have gone;

but if he disappeared now his guilt would be taken for granted, and his usefulness as a spy gone.

So Ned noticed every little while that the man was working with all his accustomed zeal, as though to counteract any suspicion that might have been aroused concerning his loyalty.

Indeed, Ned more than once took pattern from the actions of Sloper, who had few equals and no superiors at the work. It seemed a shame that so expert a cowman should ruin his career by playing a double game with his employers.

It took them several hours to get the herd near home, for as a chain is only as strong as its weakest link so cattle may be driven only as fast as the cows and calves can run.

The strain eased up considerably when they drew nearer the ranch buildings, for the possibility of their being pounced upon became less. At a distance of ten or twelve miles the dashing rustlers could afford to take chances; but not so near home. Once that hard-riding bunch of punchers started in their wake and the cattle thieves knew what was bound to follow; for saddles would be emptied ruthlessly, and no quarter shown. To the cattleman they were looked upon as snakes in the grass, and treated accordingly.

Ned had lots of time to indulge in serious reflections as he rode along, now urging his pony

to the right, and again to the left, as occasion demanded, in order to keep the main body of advancing cattle intact.

Besides thoughts of the lost chum, Jimmy, he found himself wondering whether the man whom the Government officials had asked him to look out for, Clem Parsons, could have been one of those whom he saw wildly chasing the stolen cattle; also if the deep-throated voice that had bellowed out from time to time belonged to the awful Hy Adams, step-father to Amos, and ferocious mate to the shrinking little woman he and the other scouts had met and pitied so much.

If this were so he began to speculate as to just how he might get in touch with the man who was wanted on many back charges by the Secret Service people. Doubtless these cattle thieves had a secret den somewhere among the hills, to which they repaired between daring raids. If Clem Parsons had indeed cast his fortunes in with the gang it began to look as though of a necessity Ned would have to look up this hiding-place, risky proceeding though that would seem.

Then his mind would turn again to Jimmy. What if the latter had fallen in with some of the defeated rustlers, would they treat him decently, or be apt to vent their spite upon his head because of their recent bitter disappointment?

Ned found himself wishing again and again it were all over, and that he knew the worst.

The closer they drew to the stockade the more he found his nerves quivering with suspense. If Jimmy were not there he realized he was in for a very bad night, and that sleep was not apt to visit his eyes.

The moon was now high up in the star-dotted sky, showing that some hours must have elapsed since the encounter with the bold cattle thieves.

Every chance Ned got he strained his eyes to learn if there were any hopeful signs ahead. But bright though the moon may seem, so that one could even read fine print in a newspaper held close to the eyes, it is always deceptive, and low-lying objects fail to disclose themselves until they are quite near.

It was a moving light that finally told Ned how close the herd was to the ranch buildings. Then he caught answering shouts, and eagerly he listened in the hope of distinguishing the well-known voice of Jimmy among the whoops; but although once or twice he thought he detected it, he could not be sure.

The gates of the big enclosure were open and ready to receive the cattle with the Chinese cook in attendance. It only required a little expert work in getting the leading steers to enter, and after that the job was easy.

Seeing that his services were no longer required, and with an aching heart, Ned wheeled his pony and started for the long building known

as the bunkhouse, beyond which lay the other structures.

As he did so he discovered a moving figure advancing hastily toward him. Hope grappled with doubt, and he was held in this mixture of suspense until suddenly he heard a loud sound that sent a spasm of joy to his heart.

It was a fair imitation of the long-drawn howl of the wolf; and so many times had he drilled Jimmy in making this signal of the patrol to which both of them belonged that he knew his missing chum was safe and sound, or he would not be advancing toward him so sturdily.

"Jimmy," he shouted in a transport of joy.

"Whoopee! on deck, Ned, and mighty glad it is to see you comin' back after that hullaballoo of a time!" came the answer; and in another minute the two scouts were shaking hands with considerable vim.

"I picked up your gun, Jimmy," remarked Ned, the first thing, "and here it is fastened to my saddle."

"Glory be, but that's good news," declared the other, exultantly; "d'ye know I've been feelin' mighty sorry about that same gun, for fear I'd lost it; and you know what I think of the shootin'-stick. It was either drop everything, and get me arms tight around the neck of that blasted broncho, or else find myself standin' on me head. Gee whiz! but it was a mad

race the little villain gave me before he fetched up here at the ranch house."

"I'm sorry you didn't have some of the fun of driving the herd home," remarked the scout master; "but glad it was no worse than a runaway. When I saw the white in the eyes of that pretty calico pony I knew he had a nasty temper. I suppose you'll want another horse after this?"

"What, me?" ejaculated Jimmy, bristling up instantly; "is that the opinion you've got of your old chum, Ned Nestor? Did you ever know me to give anything up first pop? Well, I'll break that spotted little fiend in, or else he'll break my coco for me. And say, he's goin' to pay up for the run he took this night. I'll keep him goin' till he's ready to drop, and will eat out of me hand. That's Jimmy McGraw's way of doin' things. The McGraws never say die as long as there's anything to eat in the house."

"Well, let's get back to the house, after I've turned my pony loose in the corral where they keep the saddle band. None of the others shown up yet?" Ned continued.

"Not yet, though I think one of the herds must be close by now, for I caught a whoop or two a while back, and it didn't come from your quarter either," Jimmy replied, walking beside his chum, who had jumped to the ground, glad of the chance to stetch his cramped legs after

such a tedious ride, to which he was not accustomed.

"You must have made record time getting here, then, Jimmy?" the scout master observed, and if he smiled at picturing the sight of his companion hanging desperately to the neck of the frantic runaway, Jimmy was not aware of the fact.

"'Tis meself that beat the score that time," he remarked, proudly. "When I look back, all I seem to remember is a rush, me arms fast around the neck of the flying steed, and then him entering the corral like a whirlwind. It was whist, bang, and there I was miles away from the fight with me heart near broke because I'd been cheated out of the best part of the game."

When Ned remembered the arduous drive that followed, with his voice husky from shouting, and how his arms ached from waving his hat, and managing his lively mount, he secretly thought Jimmy had been a lucky chap, though he did not say so.

"And you couldn't find a mount to come back on, I suppose?" he asked.

"That I couldn't," replied Jimmy. "The saddle horse corral was plumb empty; and there wasn't a puncher around to lend me his broncho. I even thought to walk out and meet ye on the way, but was afraid I'd get lost and give heaps of trouble. But glory be, you won the

day, and saved the prize herd, which ought to please the Colonel when he hears about the same."

Having disposed of his mount Ned, together with Jimmy, started for the house, intending to settle down in an easy chair and not move until he went to bed.

There could be no doubt but what one of the other herds was coming in, for the clamor of the drive was in full swing. It had been thought that Chunky and his party might be the last to arrive, as they had further to go; but unexpected difficulties must have delayed the others, or else they found themselves unable to push their herds as rapidly as Ned's party had done.

Jimmy was laughing softly to himself as they sat there, waiting the turn of events.

"What strikes you as so funny, Jimmy?" asked Ned.

"Well," replied the other scout, "I was only thinkin' how little we can see further than our noses. Now, only a bit ago some of us began to complain that the excitement was all in the past. But say, look what we've run up against before we've been in this country of the cattle rustlers a single day. Can you beat it?"

And Ned, as he looked back at the strange events marking the last twenty-four hours, was compelled to admit that Jimmy was right; for they had certainly never met with a more

thrilling series of happenings than those which had come their way. And it also seemed as though the end was not yet; for there still remained to be carried out his business affair in connection with the man who was wanted so badly by the Secret Service people at Washington.

As they sat there and exchanged remarks, the noise grew in volume, and presently from three quarters at once moving objects began to loom up, that soon developed into the expected droves. From which it would seem that success had accompanied the Double Cross punchers in every round-up, and that the herds were all safe.

CHAPTER XVI.

AFTER THE RUSTLERS' RAID.

As the other herds came in the excitement grew intense. Cattle were lowing, men shouting and horses whinnying at such a rate that the two boys changing their mind, had to make their way out to the corral to see the last of the great drive by moonlight.

By degrees things quieted down, though there would be more or less uneasiness manifested among the impounded cattle throughout the night.

The punchers were a noisy lot. Dozens of questions flowed in upon Chunky, Dutch and the other two who managed to bring in the prize herd. This was after the news was circulated that the rustlers had been in the act of making off with the cattle in Washout Coulie at the time the Double Cross boys arrived on the scene.

There was much bitter lamentation heard among the unlucky ones, because they had been cheated out of all the fun. They could have a drive at any time, but a genuine encounter with the bold rustlers was something worth while.

Ned saw that Ally Sloper was playing his part

as though he meant to rehabilitate himself in the good graces of the owners of the ranch after his recent unfortunate break. He even boasted of having wounded at least a couple of the cattle thieves with his fire; though Ned knew only too well that this was untrue, since the other had shot too high for any such damage to follow.

"He's got his nerve with him, seems like," Jimmy had remarked, as having been joined by Harry and Jack, he and Ned stood there watching the last of the cattle being driven into the big enclosure that would be patroled during the remainder of the night, so that nothing could happen to break the corral fence and scatter the inmates over the plain.

"That's more than Lefty Louie had then," remarked Jack.

"He went out with your crowd, didn't he?" Ned asked.

"Went out, yes, but he didn't come back with us," replied the other scout.

"Huh! I just thought that sneak would beat it, given half a chance," said Jimmie.

"One of the first things I did," Harry spoke up, "after getting in was to hunt around to see if the other three came back; and not a sign can you find of one of the bunch."

"You mean Cayote Smith, Bob Caruso and Tinplate George?" Ned inquired.

"All slipped away the first chance they got,"

Harry continued, in a disgusted voice. "I guess they must have seen that the game was up, and thought they might have to swing from some telegraph pole if the punchers took a notion they'd played fast and loose."

"Can you blame them?" asked Ned.

"Well, perhaps not so much; and besides, it cleans out the sneaky element among the punchers of the Double Cross outfit," Harry admitted. "But Uncle Job will have a heap to hear when he gets back from his journey. You don't think those men will dare come close in here and try to steal the cattle right out of the corral, do you, Ned?"

"I should say there wasn't one risk in a thousand that way," answered the scout leader, immediately; "they know that we'll be on guard, and chances are they've got too healthy a respect for the shooting abilities of these scrappy Double Cross punchers to want to get into a regular fight with them."

"But all the same Chunky means to keep on the watch; he'll have the stockade well guarded, wont he, Ned?" Harry continued.

"That has all been arranged for," Ned told him; "and you can make up your mind there'll be nothing doing until morning. Fact is, I'm more suspicious that Ally Sloper being up to some sly trick than that his friends will dare pounce down on the ranch in the night.

"I hope Chunky hasn't changed his mind about that snake!" Jimmy ventured. "Just because he helped drive the herd, and goes around boasting how he did such great shakes in shooting up the rustler gang, isn't any proof that he's reformed."

"Chunky is on to his capers, never you fear, Jimmy," declared Jack, "and ten to one he means to have Sloper watched every minute of the time till dawn. If he tries to slip away, he'll run up against a snag right off. It may be a piece of lead that stops his exit, or the loop of a lariat. You can count on seeing him among us when the call to breakfast comes."

"Oh! I wish it was now!" Jimmy was heard to mutter, "all this work seems to have made me as hungry as a wolf; and it's been an *awful* long time since they flagged me to a meal."

"Cheer up, Jimmy," Ned told him, "because I've got some good news for you."

"Did the lady tell Chin Chin Charley to give the boys some grub after they came in from the drive, Ned; is that the good news you want to tell me?" Jimmy eagerly demanded, looking anxiously at his chum.

"There goes the big gong right now," interrupted Jack, "and the boys are trooping for the grub tent as if they know what to expect after doing night duty. So get a move on, Jimmy;

if you don't want to find everything cleared out and only a bare table left."

Jimmy was off like a flash. When the other scouts entered the place where meals were served, they discovered him busily at work.

"Saved you places alongside me!" he called out; "and say, there's plenty of chow for everybody. That Chink knows his business, and I'm goin' to be great friends with him all the time we're here."

"It takes you to make up to the cook, Jimmy," laughed Jack.

"That's all right," replied the other, with a broad grin, "sure it's a wise boy that knows which side of his bread is buttered. And Chin Chin Charley is the boss cook, let me tell you right now. I ain't much in that line myself, but then I know a good thing when I run across it. And don't the rest of you get jealous if you see how thick me'n him are expectin' to be; ain't we, Chin Chin? "

The slant-eyed Mongolian must have already taken quite a liking for jolly, good-natured Jimmy, for upon being thus appealed to he nodded his head until his pigtail bobbed up and down, smiled affably, and was heard to murmur:

"Much good frien's, Jimmy, me; heap like Melican boy; much eat; come back more many times, alle samee!"

Apparently Jimmy was in for a good time

while staying at the Double Cross Ranch, and he believed in starting things right by making sure that the food supply would be unlimited.

After the midnight supper had been disposed of the punchers strolled forth again. Ned and Chunky were in consultation, for the puncher, knowing that Mrs. Haines had somehow conceived the idea that the young scout leader had a long head for a boy and could be depended on in an emergency, realized that it was the right thing to put certain things up to him. Of course, Chunky knew best what should be done, and Ned quickly told him to exercise his own judgment in the matter of guarding the big stockade in which the cattle had been shut up.

The boys were all tired after such a long and arduous experience. Even Jack, who as a rule could stand for almost anything, admitted that he could hardly put one foot in front of the other, he felt so stiff.

"That's because I'm not used to being so long in the saddle and playing the game they have out here," he acknowledged, "but given a chance, and we'll show our friends, the punchers, that scouts can ride pretty decently. I'm going to pick up all the kinks of the job while I'm on it; and before we leave here we ought to know how to throw a rope, drop a steer, use the branding iron on his flank, and ride the trickiest broncho there is to a stand-still."

"That's me," asserted Jimmy, like a flash. "He's a spotted little devil, too, and his name, sure it's Satan, or if it ain't it ought to be. He beat me out in the first clash and run me all the way home, like a blue streak; but there's another day acomin', don't you forget it; and that score between Jimmy McGraw and Satan has got to be rubbed out. I'm on to his curves now and I'll sting him, or it's me chased to the tall timber. You hear me warble, boys!"

"Then we'll expect to have lots of fun out of the circus, Jimmy," said Harry, "because they've been telling me that calico pony has got the meanest name around here. Some of the boys heard you boasting about how you could manage any animal, and they just couldn't help running that beast in on you. But if Uncle Job had been here I don't think they'd have dared to take the risk. You might have been killed."

"He didn't get me off and that's some comfort," muttered Jimmy, grimly, "I'm a good sticker, you see."

"Yes, I noticed that it was hard work to get you away from that table," Jack remarked, with a chuckle.

They had been given comfortable quarters on the ground floor, for the ranch house really boasted of two stories in part. Cots took the place of beds, but they seemed to be all that might be desired; and, as Jack said, were a

thousand per cent better than the hard ground, or the hot sand of the desert, which had been their resting place ever since they left Los Angeles, in that ramshackle automobile that had played them false on the journey and had to be abandoned.

It was expected that the two owners of the ranch would possible return by the following afternoon, when the stirring news could be told. Until then Ned had considered that, perhaps, no action should be taken in connection with Ally Sloper, except that the suspect must be kept under surveillance, so that he might not damage the property in any way. The Colonel would know how to deal with him; though in all probability a discharge would be the limit of his punishment.

The night passed without any alarm.

"Sure they had a lesson they won't forget for some time," Jimmy declared in the morning, as the four scouts were talking matters over.

They had had considerable trouble in coaxing the said Jimmy to get out of his comfortable bed. He declared in a sleepy voice that he had been cheated out of much repose lately, and needed rest the worst kind. Argument and pleading seeming to have no effect, Ned finally solemnly assured him that they would eat up every bit of breakfast, no matter how they suffered afterwards for it, unless he immediately

started dressing. That did the business, for Jimmy believed Ned meant what he threatened, and that there would be a famine in the land.

It was a fine morning and they enjoyed looking out at the scene from the wide and long verandah. The many buildings, the stockade now filled with hundreds of the impounded stock, the horse corrals where the ponies roamed when not in use, or out grazing on the range—all these and more made up a pleasant picture that seemed to promise the boys a most enjoyable time while at Double Cross Ranch.

Of course, Harry had some important business to transact with his uncle; but it was not going to interfere at all with their having a great time. It seemed that they had interested Mr. Stevens in the ranch and its possibilities of enlargement, with greater capital; and the well-to-do automobile maker of New York City had sent his son out to see what he thought of the idea, depending wholly on Harry's report as to whether he went into the scheme or not.

This being the case it was plain to be seen that Harry was bound to be treated like a young prince while he and his chums were at the ranch and that nothing would be deemed too good for them.

As breakfast was not ready when the boys issued forth, much to the disappointment of Jimmy, who acted as though he had not eaten

for two days, they started to look around a little.

"We might as well get acquainted with the lay of things," said Jack, "because it looks as if we were going to hang out here some little time now. And I want to say, in the beginning, that I expect to be feeling right sore when the time comes to tip our hats to Double Cross Ranch."

Jimmy gave a grunt at hearing that.

"That's nothin'," he asserted, with a twinkle in his blue eyes, "seems to me all of us are pretty much that way right now. And is it to be wondered at, when we took a twenty-five mile run last night without bein' seasoned to the saddle. But given time, and we'll get as tough as any puncher around. I think we've done right well for a pack of greenhorns."

"There, your mentioning that word pack makes me think of our burros and their loads," remarked Ned. "I wonder what became of them."

"I remember seeing one of the punchers leading the donkeys into the stable," Harry went on to say, "and p'raps we might find them there. Let's stroll in and see if Teddy'd know us again, the rascal."

And as the others were agreeable, they sauntered over to the stable where some of the cowboys' mounts were kept at times, and which usually housed the saddles and other trappings of the puncher band belonging to the ranch.

It just happened by accident that all of the scouts stopped talking as they approached the long, low building, outside of which could be seen the stout rail at which throughout the day ponies could be seen hitched, sometimes as many as a dozen or a score at a time.

Ned was in the van, and as he stepped into the doorway of the stable he came to a sudden stop and held up his hand in a warning way that the others instantly recognized as a signal for them to halt in their tracks.

No one said a single word, only Jimmy, who was lagging along in the rear, pushed forward as though anxious to get in line, so as to see what it was that had excited the attention of the scout master.

A number of ponies were in the stalls, as well as the donkeys that the boys had brought all the way from Death Valley, and which they had purchased from a party of dejected prospectors desirous of returning home.

There was a man there also, whose back was turned toward them, but whom they immediately recognized as Ally Sloper, the suspected ally of the rustler gang. He had taken down the three packs that came with the burros and belonged to the scouts, and appeared to be eagerly searching the same, evidently bent on learning what they might contain.

It happened that just at the very moment the scouts stood there in the open doorway, Sloper made a discovery that caused him to give vent to a low cry of anger and amazement.

When Ned saw what he held in his hand he did not wonder that the spy was shocked. It was nothing more nor less than the dead homing pigeon the hawk had pounced on, and which with its fateful message had afterwards fallen into the possession of the four scouts, thus putting them wise to the fact that there was treachery afloat at the cattle ranch.

When Ally Sloper saw the nature of his find he understood how it came that his clever game had gone against him so heavily, with the prize herd saved from the rustlers' raid.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE SHREWD OLD FOX.

"He's wise to the game!" Jimmy whispered close to Ned's ear, as they all stood and stared at the puncher who held the dead carrier pigeon in his hands.

It must have been a great shock for Ally Sloper. For the first time he realized just how suspicion had come to fall upon his head; and with the note which he had sent out fastened to the leg of that same messenger bird in their possession, those in charge of Double Cross Ranch during the absence of the owners knew to a certainty of his guilt.

Some movement on the part of the scouts must have told him he was being observed, for he suddenly turned his head and looked straight at them.

Ned knew there was danger of the baffled conspirator becoming furiously angry and attempting something wicked. He might be ready to take all sorts of chances, if he could but vent his rage upon those whom he suspected must have been the main cause of his defeat.

It happened that Ned was holding his rifle in his hands at the time, being about to clean it, and he instinctively threw the muzzle of it forward, so that he covered the puncher.

Although Sloper had known that he was under the ban, and suspicion directed toward him, as yet no one had thought to take his gun away. The weapon hung from his side where it could be reached in a fraction of a second, should an occasion suddenly arise calling for action.

Knowing the clever way these cowmen have of using their tools, Ned did not mean that he and his chums should be made victims to the ungovernable rage of a "caught in the trap" schemer.

"Hold up your hands, quick now, Sloper!" was what he told the other; and if he had taken a page from the life of a cowboy Ned could not have put his demand in plainer language, for this was the customary salutation of one puncher meeting another whom he had cause to believe had evil designs on his life.

The man hesitated at first. He looked on the scouts as tenderfeet, and it galled him terribly to have to submit to being ordered around by a mere boy. But there was something about Ned's way of speaking, not to mention the businesslike air of his frowning rifle, that warned him it would be a pretty risky thing to defy the scout master.

Besides, there were three more fellows in khaki close behind Ned, doubtless with other guns that could be brought to bear on him like a flash, if so be he ventured to disobey. And treacherous scoundrel though he might be, Ally Sloper valued his miserable life.

So he dropped the bird and elevated both hands above his head, showing that he surrendered to superior force and conditions which he was powerless to change.

"Jack!" called out Ned, keeping his eyes riveted on the man and never swerving that threatening rifle a fraction of an inch.

"On deck, Ned," came the answer, close to his shoulder.

"Step out there and relieve Sloper of his gun. Be careful not to get between us, remember. If he's going to be allowed to walk around till Harry's uncle comes back to settle his case, I don't think it's wise he should go armed. Men sometimes get mad and do things they're sorry for afterwards. You hear what I'm saying, Sloper. There's no harm going to come to you until Colonel Job comes back; but it's just as well that your claws are trimmed. And if you know what's good for you, don't try any kind of slippery trick on us. I can shoot to hit, and I will. Get that?"

"Oh! that's all right," replied the other, in an apparently careless tone, though his face was

drawn with anger and his eyes blazed with the venom of a panther at bay, "keep right along with your little circus. It gives you some fun and it don't hurt me any. Somebody's been killin' one of my birds, and that's what I'm huffy about."

Ned waited until Jack had stepped forward and whipped the heavy revolver out of its leather holster before he went on to say anything further. When this had been accomplished he proceeded to tell the man something more.

"A hawk was your undoing, Sloper. It pounced on your bird and was going to make a meal of it, when one of my chums used his gun to knock the pirate over. Then we found a little note fastened to the bird's leg. I have that note here, and mean to give it to the Colonel when he gets back. I won't say what it contains; there's no need of it with you. But we expect that Colonel Haines will have little trouble in fastening the guilt on the right party, after he sees the handwriting and compares it with that of the punchers working for him. And then it'll be goodbye for some one."

"Yes," declared Jimmy, hotly, determined to have his say in the matter, "and the same feller ought to thank his lucky stars if he gets away from here without being treated to a rope necklace, or given a coat of tar and feathers. I've heard that men have been up against that sort

of medicine out here for less things than tryin' to turn the herds of their employers over to the cattle rustlers."

The puncher looked at Jimmy, and his upper lip drew back with what was more like a snarl than anything else.

"You got to prove a thing first," he snapped. "It's easy to say that a man's gone bad, but my word's as good as the next one. Wait and see what the Kunnel thinks. You're all down on me, I know, but you don't see me shakin' in my boots, do ye? Somebody hooked one of my birds, I'm asayin', and used it to send a message with. That's all there is to the thing. It ain't agoin' to bother me any, I'm atellin' ye."

"Oh! Chunky told us you'd give us that sort of a yarn," Jimmy declared, "but it don't go down one little bit. We're on to your curves, Mr. Sloper, let me tell you. You'll sing small when the Colonel comes home."

"Rats! Nobody 'll be gladder to meet him than me!" asserted the other, with a great showing of effrontry that Ned knew was only assumed.

Ned felt that the chances were anything he said in trying to show the man what an offense he had been guilty of in betraying his employer would be wasted; but he could not resist the temptation to tell him something about scout law, and how boys are being taught in these

days to be faithful to their trust above all things. What he took it upon himself to say, in the most pleasant way he could, may have glanced off the other's thick hide, just as water does from a duck's back. Still, there could be not telling; and at some future time possibly some of the plain truths spoken by the scout master on that occasion were liable to rise up in the mind of Ally Sloper to haunt him.

He did not make any reply when Ned finished, only to scowl and remark:

"S'posen I c'n trot along now, without anybody borin' me in the back?"

"As if a scout would ever be guilty of shooting anybody in the back!" Jimmy indignantly burst out with.

"Yes, go about your business, Sloper," Ned told him, "and if I was you I'd have as little to do with the boys as possible the balance of the day. They're talking some about you, and it might be your wisest policy not to wander away to any lonely place, because I wouldn't put it past them to take things into their hands before the Colonel comes back."

The look that appeared on the puncher's face was as black as a thundercloud. Instinctively he clapped his hand at his side and then gritted his teeth when it only came in contact with an empty holster. A cowboy without his ready gun is somewhat of a helpless individual, from the

fact that he has come to depend wholly on it in times of trouble.

"If I was heeled I wouldn't ask favors o' any man," he grumbled, "and as it is I reckons I'll have to cave and fight shy of the crowd. The lot's set agin me anyhow, and I'll have to change my berth, no matter what the Kunnel says."

With that he turned on his heel and strode away. Jimmy looked after him, and then drew a long breath.

"Huh! talk to me about nerve," he exploded, "that dub has got them all beat half a mile, and then some. But say, d'ye really think he'll hang around till the Colonel comes home?"

"Chances are he'll beat it before the afternoon gets old," Jack asserted.

"Ought we to let him sneak away, Ned?" asked Harry. "Why not lock him up somehow, and keep him from skipping out?"

"Well, in the first place, it isn't our business to play keeper to Sloper," the scout master replied. "There are plenty of fellows here to attend to his case and I feel that I've done my whole duty when I warned him not to try and leave the ranch until your uncle gets home, Harry. If Chunky and Skinny and the rest think his room would be better than his company or take a notion to give him a warm coat of tar and feathers, it's none of our affair."

"Yes, I can see you sitting around and doing nothing while such a nasty job is on," Jack remarked, with a shake of his head. "I know you too well for that, Ned. If you saw them taking Sloper out and carrying a bag and a kettle along, I'm justly certain you'd call a halt on the operation and stand between the skunk and the boys who wanted to give him what he deserved."

Ned made no reply to this accusasion. Perhaps he knew there was considerable of truth back of it, and that, if such a case did come about, he would be strongly tempted to try and restrain the angry and indignant punchers.

The boys loitered around all morning. No one seemed able to do any particular work, save look after the cattle in the stockade, carrying water and seeing that they had some hay to keep them quiet. When the two stockmen returned from the station they would have to decide whether it were safe to drive the herds to the feeding grounds again, and watch them for a while, so as to guard against further trouble.

So noon came and went. Jimmy had no complaint to make on the score of lack of food. He told his chums he was making up for lost time; and the grinning Chinese cook was only too well pleased to dance attendance on the scout, whom he seemed to fancy more than any of the others.

Half of the afternoon dragged away, and it was understood that possibly in two more hours

they could expect the absent owners of the ranch to show up, unless detained by something not down on the bills.

It was a very hot afternoon, and as they had not been oversleeping of late, the four scout chums found themselves nodding as they sat on the shady side of the verandah. Jimmy had crawled into the one hammock and refused to budge. He declared that his sleep had been so wretched lately that he had a whole lot to make up.

Now and then one of them would arouse enough to ask some drowsy question, after which they would relapse into silence once more.

This sleepy condition of things was suddenly disturbed by loud shouts, and what seemed to be a rushing about on the part of excited cow punchers.

Even Jimmy raised his fiery head from the hammock to call out:

"What's the bloomin' row about now? Is that the way they always act when the Colonel shows up in the distance? Well, I ain't agoin' to climb out of this snug hammock to go gallopin' over the hot plain just to yell and swing my hat. You'll have to excuse me, fellers."

"But I don't believe it's the Colonel coming at all!" declared Jack. "Look at the way the boys are jumping for their horses, will you? And there's some snatching up belts with guns,

and ropes as well. It's something else that's happened."

"I wouldn't be much surprised if that Sloper's nerve had begun to fail him as the time drew near for my uncle to come back, and that he's skipped out, taking chances of being overhauled and strung up, rather than to face Colonel Job."

"Whoop! you're right, Harry, for there he goes licketty-split right now!" cried Jimmy, eagerly pointing with an extended hand.

Looking in that direction they could all see a solitary figure on horseback, speeding over the sun-kissed plain with all the haste possible. It was undoubtedly Ally Sloper, who had finally reached the conclusion that as he would be kicked off the place anyway after his employer had been convinced of his guilt, perhaps he had better not wait upon the order of his going but take a hasty departure.

He was spurring his pony "for keeps" as Jimmy observed. Shortly afterwards a bunch of the punchers broke away from the saddle corral and went swiftly in the wake of the fleeing reprobate.

"Look at him wavin' his hat at the crowd!" exclaimed Jimmy. "Sure I'd hate to be in his boots right now. There must be some hosses just as good in that bunch, and look at 'em ride, will you? I kind of think Ally will be sorry for showin' such a lot of hurry to clear out. He

must a got cold feet athinkin' of facin' his boss. He's made a big mistake, I'm tellin' you."

Ned said nothing, but he had read the treacherous puncher as a shrewd rascal, and had an idea Ally Sloper must know what he was doing.

"He gave 'em a good run for their money, boys," Jimmy loudly declared, "just look how tired their poor old ponies seem to be, aholdin' their heads hangin' low, like they'd covered forty miles. But I don't see our friend, Ally, among them. And I guess now he must have got his medicine."

"Wait and ask Skinny there, who's heading the lot," Jack advised him; for he noticed the little smile on Ned's face and believed the scout master was not so positive as Jimmy seemed to be regarding the outcome of the mad race.

Skinny looky gloomy and, indeed, there were few smiles among the seven who had so gleefully started out in his company to overhaul the fugitive and give him a little token of their warm regard.

"Did you overtake him, Skinny?" Harry called out as the returning band trotted past, their ponies lagging fearfully.

"Not so's you could notice the same, sir," replied the stout puncher who answered to so misleading a name.

"Then his broncho was better than any of your mounts, I suppose?" Harry continued.

The cow punchers started grumbling at a great rate, and said some pretty ugly things about the absent one.

"Seems like he was too slick for us, sir," Skinny went on to say, dejectedly. "Co'se we might a cort up with Ally if things'd a been right and proper; but say, it wasn't long before he started to run away from the hull outfit, and we reckons as how the old fox he must a doped all the ponies but his own mount!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

MORE TROUBLE AHEAD.

It turned out that what the dejected Skinny had said was the truth. Even the ponies that had not taken part in the chase of Ally Sloper were found to be showing plain signs of being sick. There could be no doubt but what the sly fox had laid his plans carefully, and also found an opportunity to cary the same out. He must have managed to give each broncho something in his feed that would within a certain time weaken him, especially if subjected to any violent exercise calculated to start the animal sweating freely.

Those who had pursued the fleeing puncher had kept their own for a short time, and then noticed that no matter how they urged their mounts on they were being slowly distanced. The extravagant gestures of derision on the part of Sloper also aroused suspicion; and when their ponies began to show unmistakable signs of playing out, what seemed to be the truth dawned upon them.

"It was a mighty clever ruse, I'm thinking," Jack remarked, as he and his chums went out to see the sick ponies.

"Are they poisoned and will they all die?" Harry asked one of the punchers, with keen

regret in his voice, as he watched the actions of the sick animals.

"Oh! we reckons it ain't so bad as that there," replied the cowboy, "they been locoed with some weed that Ally, he must a carried around with him, meanin' to use the same when the right time came along. But Miss Haines she give us some stuff outen the Kunnel's medicine chest, 'case, yuh see, he's somethin' o' a vetranary surgeon; and they seem to be pickin' up a bit a'ready."

An hour later the expected party was discovered heading for the ranch buildings, but not a solitary puncher went circling out to meet them. This fact must have given rise to considerable wonder on the part of the two stockmen, who knew the ways of cow punchers so well. Their astonishment was unbounded when they arrived at the stockade and saw the herds penned up.

First of all, they greeted the scouts warmly. As Harry was the representative of his father, whom the stockmen hoped to induce to join them in putting more money into their enterprise, so as to enlarge the scope of their business, it was only natural that he should be shown the utmost consideration, in order that a favorable report be taken back when he returned home.

But then Harry was the nephew of both stockmen, so to speak, and they would have welcomed him warmly for that fact alone.

When they heard all that had happened and how the lucky finding of the dead homing pigeon with its telltale message had betrayed the plans of the conspirators, they could hardly express their feelings toward the scouts.

Of course there followed the hasty moonlight ride out on the range, the round-up of the cattle that was not ordered, the fight with the rustlers, and last, but not least, the clever way in which Ally Sloper had made his escape so as to avoid facing his late employers.

It was soon decided to keep the herds confined until the following morning, when they would be driven forth once more to their several grazing grounds. They must be guarded day and night for the time being, and orders were given to all hands to shoot straight in case another raid were attempted.

Colonel Haines was very angry over the way things were going. He feared that if those reckless rustlers were allowed to hold forth in the strip of land bordering the Colorado, they would continue to take toll from the herds of the Double Cross Ranch, and that this might in some way serve to make Harry carry an unfavorable report back to his rich father.

And so the stockmen put their heads together and decided that the time had come to make a determined effort to rid the country of the lawless cattle theives. In the morning they would send a messenger to the nearest town with a note to the sheriff, demanding that he come straightway out with an armed posse and begin a systematic search for the hiding place of the gang. It must be war to the knife after this between the cowpunchers and the rustlers, who must be made to realize that it would be too hot for them in that "neck of the woods."

In the morning everyone was up before sunrise, for there was plenty to be attended to on

this day. The four scouts determined to ride out in a bunch with Chunky and see the prize herd taken back to the vicinity of Wash-out Coulie. Then they could employ the balance of the day to suit themselves, perhaps in looking for game that was to be found in the hills near by.

The ponies had all recovered from their sickness. Whatever it had been that the treacherous puncher had dosed them with, either the effect had worn off or else the horse medicine which Mrs. Haines had taken from her husband's chest must have counteracted the drug. No one was more pleased to learn this fact than Harry, who had a very tender heart and disliked to see even animals suffer.

Jimmy enjoyed that morning ride greatly. He soon caught the spirit of the range, and mounted on the back of his calico pony he drove this way and that, shouting louder than any seasoned puncher, slapping his quirt and doing bravely in assisting to keep the cattle bunched on the drive.

Everything seemed to be quiet around the coulie that had been the scene of their spirited engagement with the rustler gang some thirty hours and more previously.

After the severe lesson that had been taught the thieving pack, it was firmly believed they would remain in hiding for some time now, waiting for the excitement to blow over and the punchers to get careless again.

At the same time, when the scouts started to leave the coulie, bent on skirmishing around to see if they could scare up anything worth while in the shape of game, Chunky thought it his

duty to warn them to keep their eyes about them all the while.

"They're a slick article, boys," he remarked, seriously, for he had already come to like the chums exceedingly, while the feeling of interest was just as warm on their part; "and since they know by now from Ally that 'twas you as spoiled their plans, they might have it in for you. If so be you run up against any strange punchers, don't have anything to do with the same. They might be rustlers, 'case you know all these here cattle thieves has been on ranches, some time 'r other, and got fired because they didn't play fair. Keep your eyes peeled all the time."

"That's what all scouts mean to do, Chunky," advised Jimmy, promptly. "Their motto is 'be prepared,' even if they don't always live up to the same. But we'll try to keep our eyes on the watch for signs of trouble. See you later, boys! So-long!"

Jimmy was rapidly picking up range ways. All he needed to make him a regular puncher, he imagined, was a cowboy suit with sheepskin chaps and a real range hat, to take the place of the campaign headgear that as a scout he always wore.

Already the calico pony was showing signs of being conquered. Jimmy had a masterful way about him, being a bit reckless, and the animal, no doubt, began to understand that, as his new rider seemed bent on keeping up the fight to the bitter end, it might be the best policy to seem to yield. But Ned, still having in mind the white eyes that struck him as treacherous, warned Jimmy not to trust his mount too far.

They rode for miles along the foot of the hills. Ned never failed to keep track of the distance and the points of the compass. When they considered that it was time to head toward home they could depend on the scout master to tell them just where the ranch buildings lay, and about how much distance separated them from home.

Up to that time they had not come across any signs of game, a fact that caused Jimmy to express himself as very much disappointed; for their lunch had been a scanty one, according to his mind, and he indulged in high hopes that if they could only knock over an antelope or a deer while the rest were resting, he could start a cooking fire and fix up a little snack to allow him to hold out until suppertime arrived.

Ned, who had been closely observing their surroundings for some little time now, gave it as his opinion that they might find something in the shape of quarry if they left the plain and turned into the scrub that covered the slope of the hills.

"It looks like our last chance for to-day, boys," he announced, "and because our chum, Jimmy here, has set his heart so much on taking home some game, we might make one more try. If nothing shows up in half an hour we'll call the hunt off for to-day and come again some other time. Are you all agreeable?"

There was no dissenting voice.

Half an hour may have seemed like a very short time to Jimmy, who disliked to give anything up on which he had set his heart; but he realized that Ned was always a better judge of things than he could ever hope to be. Besides,

their ponies had begun to exhibit slight signs of weariness, not having fully recovered from the effects of the weed they had eaten, and which had made them sick. As the ranch buildings were a good many miles away, they must not force the ponies too hard if they hoped to be home by sunset.

This was only the first of many trips the scouts had planned to cover during their stay at the cattle ranch. They meant to exhaust the resources of the country for good times, and Jack was figuring on adding largely to his collection of wild animals' pictures while there. He had interested Jimmy in the matter, so that he could count on company and assistance in his excursions by day and night in search of fitting subjects.

They turned their ponies at the brush and started to comb it, being constantly on the watch for signs of a leaping deer aroused from a noonday nap in the shade.

The going was inclined to be rough, so that they had to be careful not to let their mounts trip and throw them.

Ned knew that what little air there was stirring came in their faces, which was a favorable sign; but it is doubtful whether any of the others noticed this fact, as they were not in the same class as the scout master when it came to understanding the elements that go to make a successful stalk.

Still no game obliged them by jumping out of some shady covert, which Jimmy considered mighty mean, when his stomach was fairly clamoring for food. When the nature of their surroundings showed a considerable change, and

instead of mere brush and a scraggy growth of trees they found rocks surrounding them, with miniature canyons opening up all around, Ned began to think they had gone far enough.

He yielded, however, to Jimmy's pleading when the latter suggested that they fasten the ponies in a thicket and advance a short distance on foot.

"It looks good to me up yonder," Jimmy was saying feverishly. "I'm most sure now I glimpsed somethin' movin', which might have been a browsin' Rocky Mountain big horn sheep, if they have such down here; or, again p'raps, it was a grizzly bear, or a four-legged venison feedin'. Let's take a turn up there and if we don't raise a solitary thing, why, I'll give in and go back home empty-handed, feelin' like a dog with his tail between his legs."

Ned certainly would not think of letting Jimmy make that little excursion alone, nor did he feel like allowing only one other to accompany the would-be mighty hunter. Chunky had warned them particularly against getting scattered while exploring the country roundabout.

"Where one goes all must follow!" he said, positively.

"Bully for you, Ned," Jimmy declared joyously. "The more the merrier they say; and Jack and me'll be glad to have the whole bunch along."

"How about the ponies, Ned; do you think it is safe to leave them here?" Harry wanted to know, a little anxious about the safety of their mounts; because a twelve-mile hike did not appeal to him just then.

"I don't think anything or anybody would be apt to bother them," Jack remarked, although

no one had asked his opinion on the subject.

"Sure they won't," asserted the eager Jimmy, making his jaws work as though in imagination he were already enjoying a tender venison steak alongside of a splendid camp fire.

"We'll have to risk a little," Ned admitted, as he dismounted, and once more looked to see that his rifle was in condition for immediate use.

They found places where the ponies could be tied, and the animals evidently did not object to the rest in the least, if their actions were any judge.

" 'Tis meself that's thinkin' the dope Ally Sloper gave Spot here, as I've renamed Satan, must have taken the heart out of the critter, because he's been as gentle as you please all day," Jimmy remarked, as he patted the calico pony; but Ned only shook his head without making any reply, for he had seen the ears flattened and noted the half-inclination on the part of the pony to bite at the hand that was caressing its wet neck and withers.

Presently they started up the canyon toward the spot where Jimmy still declared he believed he had seen an object move, which must be game of some sort. All conversation having been positively tabooed by Ned, Jimmy could only take it out in sundry grins and vigorous nods of his head as they proceeded.

Everybody was tuned up to a tense state of excitement as they reached the bend of the rock wall and then carefully crept around the same. Unless Jimmy had made a mistake, or was willfully deceiving them, they must speedily discover the animal he claimed to have sighted. All sorts of speculations were doubtless rife in

their minds concerning its nature; one hoped it would prove to be a deer; another may have had a monster grizzly in view while caressing his repeating rifle; while Jack, who carried his little camera along with him, would have been highly pleased could he have snapped off a big-horn sheep in the act of leaping from crag to crag somewhere up there along the high canyon walls.

Nothing loomed up, though Ned went further than his prudence dictated, in order to satisfy Jimmy. The latter's face had fallen forty-five degrees, and he was shaking his head gloomily as he stared around, looking in vain for favorable signs.

Ned was even about to open his mouth and give the order that would take the little party back to where they had left their mounts tied, when he heard something like a stone falling back of him.

Remembering that the canyon had narrowed there, like the neck of a bottle, Ned turned suddenly on his heels. If he expected to discover any sort of wild game slinking off, he was greatly in error. What he did see caused a spasm of alarm to dart through the scout master's brave heart.

Up on a shelf of rock, just over the narrow part of the defile, several figures of men could be seen. They looked like ordinary cowboys, but when Ned recognized Ally Sloper and Coyote Smith, yes, and Lefty Louie as well among them, he understood that instead they were a part of the rustler gang that he and his chums had been instrumental in cheating out of their intended prey!

CHAPTER XIX.

AT BAY IN THE CANYON.

"Dodge back!" suddenly snapped Ned, as he seized hold of Jimmy and half-pulled him along; while Harry and Jack, although they did not understand what it was all about, made haste to tumble pellmell in the direction the scout master was dragging the fourth chum.

A gun cracked and chips of stone flew up very close to their feet. This was quite enough to tell the others what sort of danger menaced them. It doubtless acted as a spur to hasten their departure from the open, for in another moment they were to be seen huddled under a shelf of rock, each fellow eagerly handling his rifle as though ready to give a good account of himself.

"Was it just one man made us skip out like all that?" Jimmy wanted to know, for he was proud, and the thought would have come back to him many times later on, to cause heartburnings and keen regrets.

"No, there was a bunch of them there," Ned informed them. "I recognized Ally Sloper, Coyote Smith and Lefty Louie. There was another big man along, a regular giant, with a bushy head of hair and the look of a terror!"

"Wow! I wonder now if that wasn't Amos's awful dad?" Jimmy exclaimed.

"But what are we going to do about it, Ned?" Harry wanted to know. "Here we are, caught in a little rat-trap, seems like. If we start to run out of this canyon, how do we know what they'll do? They've shot once already and, perhaps, stand ready to give us a volley. This is a bad job, seems to me. See what your everlasting teasing of Ned gets us into, Jimmy."

"Well, we ain't all dead yet, are we?" the other naively wanted to know, "and our guns ought to shoot just as straight as the ones they handle, which I reckon now are only the kind punchers carry, and no good at a distance. Chirk up, Harry, and listen to what Ned's goin' to say."

Instead of speaking Ned crept cautiously forward a little ways, and when he returned again, reported that so far as he could see the men on the ledge had disappeared.

"But that's not saying they're gone, is it?" asked Jack.

"I'm afraid not," replied the scout master. "You see, they command the passage from up there on that ledge. If we try and go out, they can drop rocks down and give us a volley from their guns, while we wouldn't be able to sight them."

"Two might stay here and keep the ledge covered while the others went out," suggested Harry, "and play the game that way. With our rifles we'd make things so warm for the bunch they'd hardly dare show themselves. And after the first two got out, why, they could hold the fort for the others. How's that, Ned?"

"Not bad," replied the one addressed, "only I'm afraid there may be others near by. I heard some one shout just then, which I take it must be a signal. There goes another yell from across the canyon."

"By jinks! I believe we're surrounded!" ejaculated Jimmy, and strange as it might seem, there was something not unlike a vein of gratification in his voice, as though the boy really felt pleased to know they were in for another spell of action.

"We're going to have a fight, that's certain!" announced Jack, handling his weapon with nervous fingers, in sharp contrast to Ned's steady ways.

"Well, this ought to make a pretty fair sort of a fort, I should think," Harry remarked, as he indicated the slanting rock under which they had crawled, and which sheltered them fairly well from any peril that might be hovering above.

"But if they once get up above us in the canyon, and below as well, they could pour in what is called an enfilading fire, and make it mighty unpleasant under our rock mushroom fort," Jack explained.

"Which will be apt to happen, sooner or later, if they mean to give us trouble," assented Ned.

"Then we'd better get a hustle on and see if we c'n side-step any," Jimmy was heard to remark.

"Keep watching, up and down, and shoot at any moving thing you glimpse," Ned told them, as he started to creep further under the shelf.

"Where are you going, Ned?" Harry asked, filled with curiosity.

"To see what chance there is of our finding a safer refuge than this," replied the scout master. "Somehow, I seem to have a notion that there's a sort of crevice in the canyon wall close by. If it turns out that way and it's big enough for us to crawl in, why, we'll be better fixed to stand that crowd off."

"Good luck to you!" Jimmy called after him.

"Don't watch what I'm doing, but keep guard in front!" were the last words Ned sent back over his shoulder.

A minute later and Jack announced that he believed there was some one moving up amidst some scraggy bushes growing in a spot where earth had fallen down into the rocky cut.

"I've got half a mind to send a shot up there and rout him out," he declared.

"Cut her loose then," Jimmy told him.

"If it doesn't do anything else," Harry observed, "you'll publish plain warning of our intention to fight back and give as good as we take. When they hear the crack of a rifle, perhaps, they'll make up their minds they don't want to bother us as much as they thought they did in the start."

So Jack pressed the trigger of his weapon, which promptly went off with a roar, owing to the fact that at the time he was crouching in a confined space under the shelf of rock.

"Look at that, would you?" cried Jimmy.

A man had jumped into momentary view, in the midst of the leafless bushes, and making a wild spring, vanished back of a neighboring spur of rock.

"He thought it was too hot out in the open,"

said Harry. "I wonder if you winged him with that shot, Jack?"

"I'd like to believe I did," came the answer, as Jack worked the mechanism of his rifle, so as to send out the useless brass shell, and shoot another cartridge from the magazine into the firing chamber; "but from the way he jumped, in didn't look much like he'd been struck. Don't forget to watch the other side, too. If they get started coming in on us, we'd be in a peck of trouble."

He had hardly spoken when a gun sounded, and they heard the splash of the bullet mushrooming against the stone close by.

"Wow! that's getting pretty close, let me tell you!" cried Jimmy, stooping to pick up the rough-edged, flattened circle of lead, and then immediately dropping it with a cry: "Say, that's as hot as anything! It burned my fingers to beat the band. And there goes another shot down the canyon. They're meanin' business this time, boys! If one of us gets in line with a bullet, his name will be Dennis."

In the temporary absence of the scout master Jack thought that the duty of looking after their safety devolved on him.

"Here, creep back more, everybody!" he ordered, "and snuggled down the best you can behind any stones you find. Make yourself as small as anything, while that lead's singing around here."

"Wish I could find a chance to bang away back at the nervy crowd," grumbled Jimmy, as he sprawled out like a hugh frog and listened to several shots from as many different quarters.

"What's sauce for the goose ought to be sauce for the gander, too. It's a poor rule, I always heard, that don't work both ways."

Try as hard as he would, however, Jimmy seemed unable to find a chance to discharge his gun with anything like a prospect of results. The bullets continued to flit around them, making all sorts of queer and blood chilling noises. There were several narrow escapes, too; and once Harry actually felt a tug at his arm that, upon investigation, showed him a slit in the kahki material of which the sleeve of his coat was made, proving that a passing bullet had almost drawn blood.

Several minutes had passed since this bombardment commenced, and it showed no signs of slackening. It it continued much longer there was a chance that one of the scouts might stop a bullet, and the prospect did not seem very pleasant, to say the least.

While this was going on, and all hands were grumbling, because they found so little use for their trusty rifles, Jack heard some one gently calling his name.

"Hello! is that you, Ned?" he asked joyfully, for he felt sure that the return of the scout master would mean a new rift in the clouds.

"Yes, tell the other boys to back in here after you!" the other scout went on to say.

"Yes, it's here, but hurry and get started!" Ned continued, from the darker depths beyond.

Of course, when the others heard that there was an opportunity to creep out of the fire zone they lost no time in making a move. Jimmy was declaring at the same time that it certainly

gave him a pain to be compelled to "take water" in that way, and without having inflicted any material damage that they knew of on the enemy.

"If we'd only knocked half a dozen of the skunks off their pins, it wouldn't be so bad," he lamented; "but I ain't had any chance. It ain't fair, that's what; and me just crazy to try my Marlin on that lot of mutts. But wait, that's all; my time's agoin' to come yet, and then, look out, that's what!"

When they had backed some ten feet or more they came to the wall of the canyon. Ned was waiting to show them where he had found a fissure into which he must undoubtedly have crawled some little ways, seeking to find out what sort of a haven of refuge it would turn out to be.

"I struck a match," he told his comrades, as they pushed into the split in the wall, "and as near as I could make out, there's a little cave right here. We'll take possession and hold the fort against a hundred enemies."

"Hurrah! that's right, we will!" shrilled the irrepressible Jimmy, always quick to seize upon any excuse for giving tongue.

Already they seemed to have passed beyond the reach of the flying bullets, although, of course, the ambitious rustlers did not know that and were still banging away right merrily.

"If only they'd keep that up until they'd fired away every scrap of their ammunition, wouldn't it be just fine," Harry suggested, "then we could go out and do a little holding-up on our own hook."

Ned lighted another match, so that all of them might see what manner of refuge had been

found in this emergency. It turned out to be a fair-sized cavity, nothing unusual, but capable of answering their needs.

There was, of course, no way of blocking the entrance, but with four guns to stand guard there did not seem to be much reason to fear that the enemy could ever rush their fortress.

"But it makes me clear mad to think that while we're cooped up here, like rats in a trap, that crowd can hunt around for our ponies and get away with the lot," Jack complained.

At that Jimmy raised a row.

"And that'd be the last I'd see of my calico broncho, just when I was growing attached to him, too!" he bleated.

"But from what you told us," Jack remarked, bitingly, "there was a time when you had to throw your arms around his neck in order to become *attached* to him. But never mind, Jimmy, the rustler that gets your Spot will be sorry for it, if I'm any judge of tricky horses. It may be the best thing that ever happened to you. Some times blessings come in disguise; and, if the pony's stolen, it may save you from getting a broken collarbone."

The shooting presently ceased. Whether the rustlers considered that they had accomplished the end they had in view and utterly demoralized the enemy; or, discovered the change of base on the part of the four scouts, no one was able to more than guess.

"Seems to me I can hear somebody talking close by," Jack remarked, when some time had passed without any renewal of the bombardment.

"Get ready to repel boarders, then!" urged Harry, "for they must have discovered where we've crawled. Do you think they'll try to carry the fort by assault, Ned?"

"I don't believe so, if they're the kind of men I take them to be," replied the scout master. "It would take more than a dozen desperate men to get in here past the hot fire we'd start playing on them, and I reckon there isn't that many in the bunch. No, if they do anything at all, look out for some trick."

"But they can't drop down on us, because there's only one entrance and we've got that covered," Jack asserted. "It's dark enough in here, but we could see if anybody came against that line of light, and pepper him in a jiffy. I don't see what way they could fool us, Ned."

"I hope I'm mistaken, that's all," the other returned, but his vigilance did not relax a particle, nor was he a all sanguine as to the rustlers going away and leaving them to make their escape as they plased.

The minutes dragged along. Every little while Jimmy would declare that he caught those low voices again, or it might be a rustling sound that puzzled him. Some of the other scouts admitted that they heard something of the same sort, though unable to explain what it might mean.

These things kept them constantly on the alert. Their nerves were held up at a high tension all the while they crouched there, keeping continual watch and ward.

Jimmy had several times grumbled that it seemed like a shame, that four able-bodied scouts should be bottled up in this silly way, and begged

Ned to think up a plan that would change the situation around, giving them a chance to play the aggressor.

He was about starting in for the third time to vent his disgust, when the others heard him begin to sniff.

"What's the matter, Jimmy; think you smell dinner cooking?" jeered Jack.

"No, I don't, more's the pity; but I did get a whiff of the most disagreeable smoke that ever was, or could be. There she comes again, with the breeze sendin' the same right into this little snuggery, hot-footed. Oh! my, don't that take the cake, though? Whatever can they be burnin' and how does it happen to get in here?"

"It's the trick I told you they'd be playing on us, Jimmy," said Ned, seriously. "That's what they call the stink weed, and the smoke 'll drive us out of here yet."

CHAPTER XX.

SMOKED OUT.

What Ned had said appalled them all. The situation had seemed peculiar and distressing before, because they could not see far enough ahead to even guess how it might turn out; it became positively terrifying now.

They had heard some of the punchers speak about the powerful agency of the weed mentioned by the scout master. One man had told how it was often used to force wolves from their rocky dens. When set to smouldering, it produced a smoke that was quite irresistible, and which overpowered man or beast.

"Why can't we find a way to keep it out of the cave?" Jack presently demanded, when they found themselves rubbing their eyes, in spite of themselves, and beginning to feel half choked in the bargain.

"The opening is too wide to think of closing it, more's the pity," Harry answered, with deep regret in his voice.

"And even then we couldn't keep the smoke out," Ned told them; "because we'd have to get air, and where that can enter the smoke could too."

"This is sure the worst deal I ever struck!" gasped Jimmy. "It takes your breath away like fun, and makes you think your eyes are

bored in your head. They call it by the right name, I tell you, for it certainly does smell rank. Whew! somebody fan me, or I'll go under."

Nobody took the trouble to oblige Jimmy. The fact was they all felt it just as badly as the freckled-faced scout; and each fellow was trying the best he knew how to get temporary relief.

"How's it going to end, Ned?" asked Jack, and his voice sounded very queer, for he was talking between his teeth, not wishing to open his mouth wider than he could possibly help.

"One of two ways," returned the scout master, gloomily.

"You mean we'll just have to hoist the white rag and give up?" continued Jack, in deep disgust.

"Either that or be overcome here; and nobody wants to let that happen, because some of us might suffocate. Anything would be better than that, it strikes me," was what the leader told Jack.

"What if we rushed out and started to fight our way through?" suggested Harry, who had been listening to what his comrades said; and the surprise of it all was that he, the peace-loving member of the little band, should so suddenly display such ferocity; but then it could be laid to the terrible fumes that were driving them all nearly distracted.

Ned shook his head, though, of course, none of them saw this, for it was next door to dark under the protecting ledge, and particularly in the little cave that Nature had scooped out of the solid rock.

"It would be useless," he told them.

"Yes, I reckon they're all ready to meet us with a hot fire and some of us would go under," Harry admitted, sadly. "But we can't stand this much longer, Ned. Oh! if only there was another opening to the cave, how fine it would be to slip out and leave them doing their grand smoking act."

"But there isn't, I'm sorry to say," admitted Ned. "I took the trouble to explore it through and through, and there's not the first chance to find another crack."

"Have you any plan, Ned?" pleaded Jimmy, who was choking at a terrible rate and seemed half-blinded already.

"Only a half-way idea," replied Ned. "Here it is for what it's worth. Three of us will surrender, by walking out and shouting that we give in. Jack must manage to hide somewhere in here and stand for it a little while longer. There's just the smallest chance going that they'll skip him; and, if it happens, he can hang around and help us out later."

"I'm afraid it won't work, Ned; because they must have seen that there were just four in our bunch, all told; and they'll never be happy till they root me out," was the opinion Jack expressed.

"All the same it may be worth trying," Ned declared; "and even if you're found out we can be no worse off than if we all gave up. This is a case that needs quick action."

"Then just as you say, Ned, we'll try it," Jack agreed. "I'll see if I can stand this rank smell a little while longer. Perhaps it may seem so bad that none of the rustlers'll care to crawl

in and look around. You can kind of give them to understand that one of your crowd has keeled over earlier in the fight. There's just a little hope it may pan out. Now, for goodness' sake get a move on as soon as you can. I'll find a place behind some loose stones to lie down and play dead. Hope when the time comes for me to crawl out I won't be too weak to move."

Each of the other scouts squeezed Jack's hand. He was a prime favorite in the troop, and they disliked leaving him behind more than they could tell; but there seemed little choice and Jack was always so willing to sacrifice himself for the good of others.

Ned took the lead.

"Keep close behind me," he told Harry and Jimmy, as they started to crawl over to where they knew the exit must be; for the smoke was now getting so dense that even the faint light was shut out.

Reaching this place Ned shouted, though he found himself so hoarse that he hardly knew his own voice; and several times choked, as though he was close to the border of having a fit.

"Hello! hello out there! we want to surrender! We're choking, and can't stand it any longer. Don't fire on us, and we'll come out! Hello! hello!"

There came an answering hail, close at hand.

"All right, come along, but be sure and hold your hands up over yer heads, or you might get hurt! understand that, kids?"

"Yes we're nearly all in! Here we come!"

With that Ned led the way, and staggering weakly, the three scouts groped their passage through the haze of bitter smoke toward the faint gleam of daylight that they could begin to see through the pall.

While they were still engulfed in this mantle they felt their guns rudely jerked from their hands and fierce clutches taken upon their garments. But the relief was so great when they reached the blessed air in the canyon, almost free from the acrid fumes of that terrible stink weed, that for the moment they could think of nothing else.

Each of them stood there, blinking, and rubbing their smarting eyes. Rude laughter jarred on their nerves, and they began to observe that a circle of lawless punchers stood around, apparently quite amused at the sight of their agony.

"Seems ter me thar was four o' the tenderfeet kids; how 'bout that, Ally?" one of the rustlers observed in a voice that sounded like the grumble of thunder.

Ned managed to look at the speaker, and he just seemed to know without being told that this giant must be the "awful dad" of the lad Amos, whom they had helped out of the quicksand. He was indeed a striking figure, and must inspire terror in almost any man who happened to run counter to his will. When Hy Adams growled his dislike for anything, plans were apt to be hastily changed, and in a fashion calculated to suit his whim.

There was another alongside who caught Ned's expecial attention, too. He had only to take note of the fact that this tall party

bore a scar on his left cheek to feel confident that this must be the rustler chief, Clem Parsons, who had played fast and loose with the United States Government, so that his apprehension by the Secret Service officers was apt to put quite a feather in the cap of the one fortunate enough to cause his arrest.

"There was four of 'em," Ally Sloper observed, as he pushed forward at this juncture and faced the prisoners; and raising his voice he turned to Ned and added: "Where'd that other feller skip out to? Was he knocked over by our fire? We know that he never got away, we had the canyon blocked with a cork in the neck of the bottle."

"We've lost him, somehow," Ned replied, brokenly, as though deeply grieved by the fact; "and we hope you'll look around and find our chum, who may be bleeding to death somewhere in the cayon behind a rock."

His eagerness to have them search seemed to allay any suspicion that may have started to arise.

"Oh! we'll give a sort of look when we're getting out of this hole," the man Ned took to be Clem Parsons observed carelessly; "but it's too unpleasant around these diggings right now to stay any longer than we have to. Later on, if we happen to think of it, we may come back and look him up. Get a move on now, boys, and we'll strike for the upper camp."

Those who had hold of the three prisoners urged them forward, and it was evident that they meant to leave the vicinity of the recent fight. When Ned was sure of this he allowed

himself to have a most violent fit of coughing, and managed to mix in several significant signals that were not unlike the howl of the wolf in the stillness of a night on the open plain.

This he knew must be heard by the suffering scout inside the cave. It would tell Jack they were going, and that he could immediatley make a start looking toward relief from the overpowering fumes.

Ned would have been better satisfied could he have received a return sign from the devoted chum, to assure him all was well; but of course that was utterly out of the question. He could only hope that dear old Jack would not by this time have become so weak from his sufferings as to be unable to make his crawl out to the pure air, and then follow after them.

The three scouts looked quite dejected at first. They were so accustomed to having things come their way that this thing of being made prisoners galled them. Jimmy in particular bewailed the circumstances attending their capture. He seemed to think that it was next door to a disgrace because they had not been able to put up a desperate resistance, and at least disable several of the foe before yielding to superior force.

"'Tis a shame, that's what it is," he kept on muttering, grimly, "to have to put up your hands like we did without knockin' the stuffin' out of a few of the enemy. I'll never be able to look myself in the face again, sure I won't."

"Oh! yes you will, Jimmy," Harry assured him; "I expect to live to see the time when you sit beside a fire, gobbling your rasher of

bacon and fried potatoes, and telling the story of this adventure to some of the other boys in the troop."

"Now, that's adding insult to injury!" declared Jimmy, sadly; "when you go and make my mouth water tellin' about breakfast stuff. Chances are they'll try to starve us while they hold the lot for ransom."

Ned gave him a punch in the side when he said this.

"Let up on that kind of talk, Jimmy," he whispered sternly; "don't put the notion in their heads. If they once knew who Harry was, and what he came out here to do, they'd think up some scheme to get even with Colonel Job. Even Ally Sloper didn't hear what our mission was, and thinks we're just on the plains to have a good time. And keep up your spirits. Leave it to Jack; he's our best hope just now."

They were walking by themselves at the time, the rustlers forming a sort of cordon around them though separated by a dozen or two feet; and hence the scouts found an opportunity to exchange a few remarks in whispers without being overheard.

After that Harry and Jimmy did pluck up a little more hope. So long as Jack was free to move around they might expect assistance, though none of them could give more than a vague guess what shape it might take. Jack was to decide upon his own course. He might think it best to follow them up, and then, after seeing where the cattle thieves had their secret camp, make his way back to where the ponies

had been left, mount, and head for the ranch at top speed in order to bring a rescue party to their relief.

How they hugged that hope to their hearts as they climbed upward after those of their captors who were in the van. Ned was wide-awake all the while. He believed that Jack must surely follow them, and in order to make his task as easy as possible the scout master was trying in every way he knew how to leave plain indications of their having passed along this way.

All this had to be done in a fashion calculated not to attract the attention of the rustlers. If they realized that he was purposely turning over stones every now and then by pretending to stumble, they would know what this implied; consequently the rustlers would lay a trap for the comrade who was expected to follow; and hence Jack, when coming creeping along the trail, might walk into an ambush, so that he too be taken prisoner.

An hour passed, and all of the scouts were becoming very weary of climbing, much against their will, when indications ahead told them they must be getting close to the rustlers' camp.

It was hidden in the most isolated part of the mountain range, and where there did not seem to be one chance in ten that any cow puncher would ever stray in search of lost steers. Faint wreaths of smoke first told the sharp-eyed Ned that the camp was near by; then he heard a dog bark, and a horse neigh, as well as sounds very similar to the rattle

of steers' horns when being driven from one pasturage to another.

Ten minutes later and they were walking into the camp. The boys observed everything closely, for they never expected to again find themselves in the midst of a gang of reckless rustlers, and it was their policy to "make hay while the sun shone."

Strange to say they had not been searched up to now for any valuables, though the man who was leader of the rustlers had looked to make sure they were not armed with any weapons besides their rifles and hunting knives, both of which had been taken away from them.

Harry wished now he had thought to ask Jack to lend him his little camera, for the spectacle of that camp was one they must often wish to remember in future days. Still, as those who dwelt in the heart of the mountains were mostly fugitives from justice, it was hardly likely they would permit any one to snap off a picture that must prove of value to the officers who were often looking for them far and wide.

The afternoon was pretty well done by now. Had their original plans been carried out the boys would have been entering camp by this time. Instead they found themselves in one of the most distressing situations in their career; prisoners among the lawless rustlers, who must know that much of their recent defeat was due to the coming of these Boy Scouts to the cattle ranch bordering the Colorado country.

CHAPTER XXI.

IN THE HANDS OF THE RUSTLERS.

As the night came on the spirits of the three scouts seemed to sink considerably. Somehow the passing of the sun and coming of darkness before the rising of the moon brought with it a new sense of being at the mercy of these rough men, who snapped their fingers at the law, and did about as they pleased.

Ned at first wondered why they had been brought here to the camp, the location of which had long been a mystery to outsiders. He even feared that circumstance meant something terrible to himself and two chums, because now that they held the secret of the hide-out of the rustlers, it did not seem likely they would be allowed to depart, even if they swore never to betray the fugitives from justice.

Then he noticed certain signs, being a most observant lad, as we already know, that told him another story. The rustlers for some reason or other were getting ready to make a change of base. Perhaps they believed that the vicinity of the Double Cross Ranch was likely to become too warm for them after what had happened, for Ally Sloper must have brought considerable news when he joined the gang.

The boys were allowed to sit together on a blanket. They had been tersely warned by the

hoarse-voiced giant that if they so much as tried to escape they were sure to be shot down like coyotes; and there was that in his ferocious manner that made Harry shiver with apprehension; while Jimmy was seen to clench his fists and grit his teeth, as though his fighting blood had been aroused.

Ned had to smile, though. when he looked at the fearful difference between the two; one a giant and the other not far from being a dwarf. It reminded him of a little bantam defying a great barnyard rooster, or of David, armed only with his puny sling, facing Goliath, the mighty man of the Philistines.

Fortunately Jimmy had sense enough not to open his mouth, thanks to the shove Ned gave him with his elbow. Had he dared say anything bold and saucy to the big bully, the chances were he would have rued the day, for Hy Adams could have easily seized him by the nape of the neck and swung him around his head six or seven times, just for a lark.

"I wonder now do we get any?" Jimmy was saying, rather plaintively, as he sniffed the odors of supper cooking.

Jimmy could have stood for almost anything save starvation, or being deprived of his regular feed. If he had known that he had to run the guantlet in the morning, or be toasted at the stake, the chances were that he would have let out a howl to the effect that he hopedt hey would at least fill him up with something to eat before making him lie down for the night.

"I wonder where he can be right now?" Harry was whispering, as he managed to cast

his eyes around the bordering rocks, without doing it in such an open manner as to invite suspicion, in case any of the rustlers were watching them.

"Of course you mean dear old Jack," the scout master went on to say; "and I'm hoping he's at the ranch by this time, telling his story to the Colonel."

"I can shut my eyes and see the riot there'd be in that case," mused Harry, with a sigh; "every puncher would be wanting to join the rescue bunch, and the herds might go hang for one night. But Ned, perhaps he followed us up here?"

"Yes, that might be so," admitted the other scout.

"Meaning to try and get us loose all by himself," added Harry, huskily, as if the very thought of such a thing caused him to tremble with eagerness.

"It would be a great feat if Jack could manage it," admitted Ned, longingly, "and I've got a lot of faith in our chum; but somehow I hope he's chosen to make for the ranch and get the boys started this way."

"Queer they didn't bother doing much hunting for Jack, did they?" pursued Harry.

"Oh! you heard what the leader said, that it was too smoky and unpleasant down in the canyon, and that they'd come back in the morning to look him up. Little do they care whether he's living or dead. They're a heartless bunch; and I'd like to see them caught in a net. You can see they've got some of their women folks along, and that this is like a regular border vil-

lage. There's a pack of dogs, and over in that cabin I've counted as many as four children—all with hair that looks like it had never known a comb and clothes that would shame an Indian squaw. But the men are a tough lot, and all they seem to care for is playing cards, drinking, smoking and stealing cattle."

The night had settled down by now. It was dark at first, because the moon would not rise until a little later, being now past its full.

Greatly to the relief of Jimmy one of the women brought them over some supper, such as it was. They were hungry enough to forget its shortcomings, though Jimmy did complain a little that they saw the bottom of the kettle too soon to suit him, and that he just knew he'd wake up feeling starved long before dawn. But then Ned and Harry were so used to hearing their comrade let out this sort of a wail that they let it pass by, without extending him any sympathy.

"Now for a night of it!" Harry said, later on, after they had been sitting there, watching the strange scene until they began to feel sleepy.

"But how are we goin' to sleep without our blankets?" Jimmy wanted to know.

"We might ask for some," Ned told him, "but honest now, I'd feel a little queer about snuggling down in some of the coverings I've noticed around here."

"Same with me," added Harry, shuddering, "because I'm silly enough to be a little particular about the blanket I get my face down in. If they'd only let us crawl in out of the night air, that tumbledown cabin close by would suit the

bill. Suppose you beckon to that leader fellow and ask him, Ned?"

So when Ned managed to catch the eye of the party he believed to be the much wanted Clem Parsons, he invited him to come over to where they sat, which the man did, though with a frown on his scarred face and an ugly look in his eye that the boys did not like any too well.

"It gets pretty cool toward morning and as we haven't any blankets, would you mind if we crawled inside that deserted cabin there to sleep?" Ned asked.

"So you can get your heads together and try to skip out, is that what you're after?" the rustler demanded, harshly. "Well, this place is as good as anything you'll get, so make the most of it. Tomorrow we're meaning to fix you up, so as to let old Colonel Job know what we think of him. Perhaps he'll have a special cage built to keep his prize fowls in when you get back to Double Cross Ranch. We owe him a long bill, and think we see a chance to pay it before we quit this region for our new location down in Arizona. Now shut up and don't give us any bother, or I'll let Hy Adams loose on you. He wanted to have a quirt jubilee right away, with you boys tied to stakes, and every puncher being allowed three cuts at your bare shoulders. But I said, 'Wait till morning for the fun.'"

With that he turned on his heel and left them, Jimmy with wide-open mouth and trembling with indignation.

"D'ye think now he meant that, or was he playin' hocus-pocus with us boys?" was what

Jimmy asked, as soon as he could catch his breath.

"I'd like to believe it was in the nature of a joke," Ned told him, "and that he was only trying to make us feel bad during the rest of the night; but from all I've heard about Clem Parsons, he's a cold-blooded scamp, and I'm afraid he means to do something to us, Harry, that will make your Uncle Job furious. He said they meant to leave this part of the country, and on that account it's likely they'll go further than if they expected to stay around here right along."

"Gee! I'm sorry to hear that," Harry observed, and it could be seen that the boy must be considerably worked up, for Harry seldom used slang of any kind.

As for Jimmy, he ground those strong white teeth of his and muttered to himself in a fashion that told how excited he was.

"There he is talking with that big rustler now," Harry remarked, a minute later; "the one you think must be Hy Adams, and who hurried over to join the leader after he saw him leave us. See the giant swinging his arms, and hear him growl like thunder in the distance. Now, what d'ye think he can be asking of Clem Parsons, Ned? D'ye expect he wants to have that nice little practice whipping-bee right away, and not wait for morning to come?"

"I don't know, but something's bothering him—that's sure—for he keeps pointing this way and wagging that great big head of his, like he'd shake it off. Seems to me as though he's

winning his point, too, because the other man isn't objecting as much as he did before."

"There, he shrugs his shoulders and turns away, just like he told him to do as he wanted and that as for him, he washed his hands of the whole business. Oh! what if they do start in to use those cruel quirts on our backs, Ned?"

Ned Nestor turned a little white himself at the very thought; but he clenched his teeth in that determined way of his and said, slowly:

"That would be pretty tough, boys, and I hope it doesn't strike us; but if it should, remember that we're scouts, and supposed to be able to stand pain, like the Indians were taught, without wincing or crying out."

All of them were watching Hy Adams with uneasy eyes. They seemed to know from the triumphant glare with which the terror of the hills observed them that he must have carried his point with the leader, and was now only figuring on how he had better proceed.

"Oh! if only I had my Marlin here right now, mebbe I wouldn't put him on the blink in a hurry, though?" Jimmy was sighing; "I'd hold up the camp and let you fellers find your own guns. Then we'd pick out the ones we wanted to keep, and tell the others to clear out. But that's all a dream, because here I am with only me two fists to back me up, and they wouldn't count against that hog!"

Hy Adams was now talking with several of the most dissipated looking of the men. Whatever he might be telling them it seemed to please the others immensely, for they laughed harshly; and one fellow immediately stepped over to take

down his quirt from where it hung alongside the door of a shack.

"There, did you see that?" demanded Harry, "it means whips after all, Ned! Oh! to think of their cruel hearts. Just like we lived down in Delaware, where they have the whipping post going. Can we do anything to get them to let up on the game?"

"I'm sorry to say not," responded Ned. "Seems as if they'd got to the point where they must see the blood flow to satisfy their desire for revenge. We spoiled their little scheme for getting your uncle's best herd of prize cattle that he means for exhibition purposes and this Adams has it in for us on that account."

"Did you ever see such a terrible brute in your born days?" Harry asked, with a shiver of dread, for there were three punchers now who had laid hold of quirts and amused themselves, cracking the lashes at the ends of the whips as though desirous of inspiring additional fear in the hearts of the prisoners by making such suggestive sounds.

"Amos was right when he said his step-father was the biggest terror along the border," Ned admitted. "I've seen some bad men, but never one that struck you as the howling storm does, and that describes Hy Adams. I'm feeling sorry for Amos, who must get in the way of that ham of a fist every once in so often. And that little woman who calls Hy Adams her husband, just think of how she must suffer when he rages like a bull in a china shop?"

"Now he's heading this way, Ned," Harry said half inaudibly, for he was tremendously excited.

"Well, try your level best to show a brave front, Harry, no matter what happens. We've been in lots of tough places and, somehow, always seem to get out before the worst we've been expecting comes along. I'll try and talk him out of doing this cowardly thing. Sometimes I I seem to be able to swing people around to my way of thinking, you know, Harry."

"Yes, that's so, Ned, you nearly always can; but you're up against it this time, I'm afraid. He's only a big brute, and chances are he'll strike you in the mouth if you try and talk him out of doing a thing he wants to carry out. We certainly are in the worst fix of our lives right now."

"Talk to me about the silver linin' of the cloud," burst out Jimmy, "I'd like to see what that means. Here we're in a black hole and the ladder's been took away. I'm feeling pretty punk myself; but c'n stand it if the rest of you do."

"They always say it's darkest just before dawn, Jimmy," advised Ned, seeking to buoy up the spirits of his two chums more than that he could himself see any reason for hope.

The giant, accompanied by a crowd of men and women, advanced toward the spot where the three scouts stood awaiting their coming, for the boys had scrambled to their feet, anxious to know the worst.

"Peel off!" roared the bulky leader, with some pretty strong additions to the order that no doubt he fancied were apt to strike terror to the hearts of the trio of khaki-clad boys who had fallen into their hands. "Strip them ere jackets

off in a hurry, 'case we's agwine tuh warm yuh up some. Fear'd ye'd git cold in the night, was yuh? We'll fix it so't you won't need tuh worry 'bout feelin' the chill o' the night air. Quick now, git bare down tuh the waist, er we'll hev tuh help ye strip!"

Ned did not say a word of protest. He realized then and there that such a thing would be on the same principle as waving a red flag in front of an enraged bull.

He looked at Harry and Jimmy and then began to unbutton his faded kahki coat, while the impatient giant started to snap his quirt viciously close to their ears, as though he could hardly wait until the time came to use it on their shrinking flesh.

They did not dare linger too long, and yet it was without any heart that the chums began to disrobe. Who could blame them for their hesitation and the beseeching looks they fastened on the red face of the big bully of the camp. But water falling on the rock would make as much impression as these looks seemed to do on Hy Adams.

They were down to the last garment when Harry uttered a little cry.

"Look, oh, look, Ned, who's coming into camp!" he whispered; but Jimmy must have also caught the words, for he immediately added:

"Sure, it's little Amos and his poor maw; mebbe they know the camp's agoin' to be busted up and they got orders from the boss to come here, so's to travel along with the rest. But shucks! Little Amos and his maw can't help us

any. They just come in time to see the circus—that's all!"

And yet, strange as it might seem, a tiny glow of hope struggled up in Ned's heart; just as though the coming of those two helpless ones might be the straw that was meant to swing the balance again in their favor, he knew not how!

CHAPTER XXII.

THE REAL BOSS—CONCLUSION

Ned saw Amos, who was leading a couple of burros loaded with stuff apparently from the cabin on the creek, stop and stare at them. Then he dropped the ropes by which he was leading the pack animals, and clutching his mother's dress pointed excitedly toward the spot where the drama was being conducted.

Just what he may have said Ned did not know, but to his astonishment both Amos and his "maw" started toward them, almost running in their eagerness to get there.

Some one among the rustlers must have seen them coming, for Ned discovered that broad smiles were spreading over the faces of the men nearest him, and he wondered why this should be.

He knew very soon.

Hy Adams was bustling around and roaring as was his wont, because he saw the boys ceasing their efforts to disrobe, as he had ordered.

"I done tole yuh what yuh'd git 'less yuh hurried, and take that!" he shouted at the top of his terrible voice, as he aimed a vicious cut at the nearest scout, who happened to be Jimmy.

The quirt struck him squarely across his shoulders, and as there was only a thin garment to protect the skin, Jimmy gave utterance to an involuntary yell, though there may have possibly

been more of anger in the outcry than distress.

Then something unexpected happened. That stinging quirt was snatched from the uplifted hand of the bully, and, as he whirled to see who dared interfere with his pleasure, he seemed rooted to the spot to discover the blazing face of a wiry little woman thrust close up to his.

"What's all this mean, Hy Adams, you big hulking coward!" she shrilled in tones that could be heard all over the camp; "here you darin' to whip the brave boys that saved our Amos from bein' drawed down in a quicksand! I told 'em when they stopped in to see me that I'd do anything I could to pay 'em back, and seems like the time has come sooner'n we thought it would. Jest drap them whips—all of ye! There ain't agoin' to be any fun like that to-night, you hear me, Hy Adams? Tell the pack to clear out. Hurry up now, and do what I say, or I'll humble you afore the hull crowd!"

There never was such a complete change in a man as had come over the giant. In that apparently meek little woman he knew of old that he had his boss. Ned understood now plainly enough what Amos meant every time he mentioned his step-father as being such a bully that men jumped to do his bidding; and, on each occasion, wound up with a few mysterious words that, at the time, had piqued his, Ned's, curiosity very much.

Hy Adams glared at his wife for a full minute; but if anything her snapping eyes blazed with more fire than ever. Then he wilted, as a startched linen collar is likely to do on a hot summer day.

"Shore, it's all right, Belinda, if yuh sez so," he said weakly, "we was jest agivin' 'em a little skeer tuh pay up fur them havin' knocked us out o' a bully lot o' prize steers. But I sure reckons as how they been punished enough. Turn around, boys, and let it go till mornin', when we'll kerry out our plans."

"Not if they mean any harm acomin' to these boys, just put that in yer pipe and smoke it, Hy Adams," his wife told him, as she shook her fore finger under his nose; then she suddenly thrust her whole hand against his face, and continued: "Now, make yerself skeerce, 'cause I wants to talk with these boys. But I'll be awatchin' you, Hy Adams, don't forgit that. And I allers keep my word, you know."

Then Ned understood what Amos had meant when he said there were "high old times" at home every time this big step-father of his came around, and that his visits were getting less numerous.

After that the boys had it easier. Mrs. Adams even got out several blankets of her own from the bundles on the pack animals and loaned them to the scouts; but all of them wished she hadn't been so kind, for they felt that now they must of necessity make use of the coverings, and it hurt some.

By degrees the camp quieted down. Jimmy was long since fast asleep, but then Jimmy could get in that condition with only half a chance. Harry had remained wakeful quite a while, but Ned believed he, too, must have crossed over, for at times he was able to catch the regular breathing of his chum that seemed

to tell of slumber and oblivion, so far as worries went.

Ned could not manage to forget himself. He turned from side to side and assumed all sorts of fresh attitudes, but his brain seemed too entirely active, for even when he closed his eyes he kept on thinking of everything under the sun.

So midnight came and went.

The small hours of the night had now arrived and, sure enough, a coolness began to spread about that made Ned draw that blanket up closer to his face, much as he disliked doing so.

Once, as he was turning to avoid some small object that felt like a root and bored into his ribs under the double blanket, he saw something moving over among the bushes. Looking a second time, Ned was sure it must be a handkerchief. Then it vanished and something else took its place, which he made out to be the face of a man.

Evidently the party must have been trying to catch his attention, for immediately he looked in that direction he saw the other make a warning gesture and then drop down again out of sight.

Ned was thrilled, for he understood from this significant sign that help must be at hand. Who the man was he could not positively say. It may have been Colonel Job; then again he rather fancied that it was Chunky, the lanky puncher, for whom all the scouts had conceived such a liking.

Lying there Ned waited to see what was going to happen.

He could hear the pawing of ponies that were secured near by. A dog bayed the moon, as his kind have a weakness for doing at a certain time of each month. Other sounds there were, too, such as might be expected in a camp like that of the roaming cattle thieves.

Then Ned began to notice movements here and there. He fancied that the camp was being surrounded, and how his heart thrilled with rapture at the thought. Unable to keep the secret to himself, he kicked Harry in the shins, and before that worthy could voice an indignant protest, Ned was whispering the inspiring truth in his ear.

In turn Harry told Jimmy, so that presently the three chums were lying there trying to catch fugitive glimpses of what was going on without exciting the suspicion of the cattle poachers.

Then there was a sudden loud cry of alarm. A woman, it turned out, had discovered the lurking shadowy figures in the bushes, when she awoke feeling feverish in the night, and started for the spring close by in order to quench her thirst.

After that it was like a volcano when the whole top blows out. There were loud shouts and yells and screams; there came the quick detonation of firearms and the shieks of women and children.

The rustlers were taken quite by surprise, and besides a bunch of the Double Cross punchers the sheriff and his big posse was on hand, bent on wiping out the reproach that had so long

existed in his territory, so that the camp was pretty well surrounded on every side.

In spite of all precautions, however, when the turmoil and excitement were at their height, some of the men managed to break away and escape, at least for the time being.

Neither Hy Adams nor the leader, Clem Parsons, were among these lucky ones. Ned himself had been quick to act. He had noticed so many things since coming to the rustlers' camp that he could put his finger on the spot where his rifle as also the weapons of his chums had been stowed. And his first act was to fling himself into that tent with all the eagerness of a hungry hawk.

He had met a man crawling out and collided with him in such a clever way that the fellow was knocked senseless, while the only damage Ned sustained was a lump on the side of his head, which later on yielded to treatment and witch hazel.

No sooner had he found his rifle than Ned was off, in hopes of running across the leader of the rustlers, Clem Parsons, the man who had one of the most checkered careers back of him known to Secret Service officials.

Once again luck was with Ned, for he came upon the tall man with the scar on his left cheek just as he was making headlong for the neighboring rocks If he had once passed from the sight of those who were busily engaged capturing the camp, there was every reason to suspect that the foxy rascal would not be come up with in a hurry again.

"Halt! throw up your hand, Clem Parsons.

I've got a warrant for your arrest. The Government wants you at Washington, and I've been asked to fetch or send you there. This rifle shoots true, and my finger is on the trigger, so go slow if you know what's good for you!"

The rascal saw that he was in a trap and that so long as that gun bore on him he would be next door to crazy to attempt any hostile move. So Ned called to Jack, whom he saw close by, to come and tie the hands of Clem Parsons behind his back until he could borrow a pair of steel handcuffs from the sheriff.

Hy Adams was also in limbo. He had fought like a tiger, for he was possessed of a spirit of ferocity that could stand up before anything but the will of his little meek-looking wife; but a glancing blow from a clubbed gun knocked him out, and the sheriff had him fastened up so all his enormous strength was of no avail by the time his wits came back to him again.

Some of the rustlers managed to escape, but the gang was broken up for good as both leaders had fallen into the grip of the law. To finish with Clem Parsons it might be said that the scouts found a chance to send him on to where he was wanted and that in due time he received a long sentence.

Hy Adams is still in a Nevada penitentiary, and will be considerably older if he lives to complete the sentence he received, as a stealer of cattle and horses. Amos and his mother removed to a town, where the boy could attend school. Colonel Job and his wife interested themselves in Mrs. Adams and saw that she was placed in a position where she could earn a

good living doing sewing for the people of the neighboring ranches. Amos expects to soon take his place as a regular puncher on the pay roll of the Double Cross, for boy that he is he has proven to be as expert at rounding up and branding cattle as any veteran might be.

Of course, having carried out his mission, Ned could enjoy all that followed with a free heart. And Harry, too, soon came to the conclusion that it would be a very good and profitable investment; so that his accounts of what the ranch was capable of producing soon convinced his father, who had every faith in the boy's judgment. Of course, Colonel Job and Mr. Henshaw were delighted with the glowing prospect that opened out before them.

What glorious times Ned and his three scout chums did have during the period of their stay on the plains. They explored every nook within three days' journey, and even took a run over to the famous Colorado Canyon, where Harry was able to feast his eyes to his heart's content on the strange rock homes of those cliff dwellers, the Moqui Indians; and Jack took myriads of pictures of what they saw while in the gigantic cleft that is reckoned one of the seven wonders of the world.

The vacation was all too short, and in the joy of the present they could even, for the time being, forget the terrible suffering they had endured while making their way across country from Los Angeles, first by automobile and then with pack mules purchased from a prospecting party that was starting back home disgusted with the hard luck that had pursued them.

When the time came to say good-bye to the Double Cross Ranch and the punchers who had come to think so highly of the scouts, Ned and his three chums felt almost broken hearted. They would never forget all they had gone through with on this wonderful trip; and what with the copious notes taken on the way, while the stirring incidents were still fresh in their memories, and the abundance of fine pictures Jack carried back with him, it would seem as though less fortunate members of the troop might get a pretty good idea of what had happened to their four comrades.

Of course, Ned and his chums were bound to see other stirring adventures, and we only trust that it may be our privilege to write some of them up for the pleasure of those boys who delight to read of brave hearts and intrepid souls among the wearers of the khaki.

THE END.

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